



THE RAIN BIRD

a novel by **SARA LIDMAN**

\$4.95

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Sara Lidman

Translated by Elspeth Harley Schubert

To the people of the Vasterbotten region in northern Sweden, the Regnspiran—the rain bird—is a creature of ill omen. That is why they say its cry foretells rain, in the age-old way people have of trying to hide their faces from the inevitable. But in their hearts they know what the cry of the rain bird means, and that what it portends must come to pass.

Egron Stahl was a God-fearing man whose uprightness could be measured by his fear of the devil; his wife, Hanna, a simple soul. To these poor farmer folk, in the late summer of their lives, an only child is born, the girl child Linda. How could Hanna think otherwise than that God had blessed her? But Egron was filled with foreboding that God was testing him once again and that he would fail.

And indeed the passionate, willful child became as much of a trial to her father as she was a joy to her mother. Egron could not bend her to his pious will, and the guilty knowledge that he was jealous of Linda for Hanna's favor weighed heavily upon him.

(continued on back flap)

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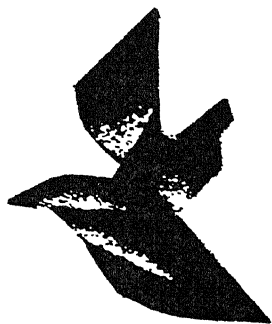
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A NOVEL BY **Sara Lidman**

TRANSLATED FROM THE SWEDISH
BY ELSPETH HARLEY SCHUBERT

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SPRING quivered like a flame in the sky, while the earth still lay hard and colorless under ground frost, the day Linda was born.

Her mother, Hanna, who for many years had longed for a child, was joyful, but her father, Egron Stahl, said gloomily, "I thought the Almighty had quite different trials in store for His servant."

A long-throated shepherd's crook of a man, he stood by the window of the bedroom lecturing his wife on original sin and the agonizing rebirth of man. His figure was so straight it seemed to submit to the rounding of the skull with reluctance, the first full curve being achieved with the forehead—so full, indeed, that there seemed to be no indentation for the bridge of the nose. The lower part of his face appeared to cower under the authority of this dome and the chin to hide itself under his Adam's apple. But the strong and sinewy throat retrieved the lost authority.

"Imagine her having everything perfect from the start, even though it is all so small," exulted the mother.

"What if she grows into as great a sinner as I have been?" Egron said.

"I wonder if that Hanna in the Book of Samuel was ever as happy as I am?"

"What are you saying, wife? What boastful words are

these?" Egron took his eyes off the weathercock at Vestbergs', and turned to stare at the woman in the bed.

But she ignored the rebuke, for she felt that she was in a state of grace. In vain he spoke to her of the sin of pride.

"If you would only touch her for a moment, and feel for yourself," she coaxed.

But Egron turned away, and renewed his communion with the weathercock.

"Don't you remember that verse in the Psalms about how fearfully and wonderfully a man is made?" Hanna persisted.

"I know," he said. "But I have not been given any sign how to interpret this event. So far, I feel it only as a temptation. It exhausts me to think of the struggle which has already begun for this girl-child, the agony which must be gone through before the power of the old Adam is demolished in her. Having to endure all that again, and to know that what I had to suffer in crushing my own arrogance and egoism will be no help to her. She must trudge every inch of the road of faith herself. How shall I ever be able to rear her and guide her? Why should this heavy burden have been laid upon me in the autumn of my life, when I believed myself about to achieve a state of purity?"

During their life together, Egron had often described to his wife the evolution of his soul and bemoaned, not without relish, the sinful life he had led as a young man, when he had sometimes taken a drink or two at the market, got into fights, and paid nocturnal visits to the girls in the church huts. He would speak, too, with triumphant reminiscence, of how the Lord had finally grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and lifted him out of the paths of the ungodly. His wife had always listened with silent admiration. But now, with Linda in her arms, self-satisfaction had taken such hold of her that she

actually ventured an opinion of her own in spiritual matters.

"But surely it is written that those who do not receive the Kingdom of God like little children . . . Maybe Linda has been sent to help us. . . ?"

"The intention behind the words was different. It is the human heart that has to be re-created and pure as a . . . *as*—that is what the Book says. The child itself . . . in the flesh, is of Adam, with all that entails."

"Why, goodness, she's nothing but a tiny lamb," Hanna purred.

"All of us have been small once. Me, too. I didn't weigh more than about ten pounds. And yet I was to grow up into such a great sinner. . . ." Egron sighed heavily.

At this, his wife laughed so heartily she set the bed hay rustling.

"And all you do is to laugh," he grumbled.

"No, of course not," she giggled. "My poor Stahl, who has to be so important . . ."

Egron turned on his heel and went out of the cottage. Looking up at the sky, it seemed to him that its startling brightness mocked the earth, which, for a long time, would be unable to respond with as much as a green leaf.

At Old Farm Elof was laying out manure on his fields. Egron's cousin was hard-working as a heathen. He simply cultivated the soil and was never afraid of getting too involved with earthly matters.

A sudden gust of desire to work blew through Egron, an eagerness to use his long arms to dig a patch of his own earth, or to collect stumps of pinewood to make a charcoal kiln on his land on Gnome Mountain. But he felt that this was the kind of temptation that might assail many fathers of children. If his wife had not been tied to her bed he would have gone off to

the mountain cottage to have a private tussle with the Lord.

A week up there would have cleared away all the worldly thoughts that kept rankling in his mind. But with Hanna so completely absorbed in her new motherhood, he was unable to leave the farm. Up to now, she had always sensed his occasional need of solitude and self-punishment. "Today it is my turn to clean the cow barn," she would say. Then she would bring him his coffee in bed, make herself a few sandwiches and find herself work for half a day. By her labor and discretion she had made it possible for him to reinforce himself spiritually, and he often thought, vaguely, that this would somehow be made up to her. And then, during her pregnancy, she had, unexpectedly and unmercifully, revealed to him a streak of cunning in her nature.

She had, in the past, dropped an occasional hint that she would like to paper the cottage and put up curtains, pointing out that they would soon be the only family in the village who still had bare walls. But in those days one look from him would have been enough to make her feel that even a roof over their heads was an excessive gift of God, and that there could certainly be no mention of wallpaper and such trumpery. And then she would look ashamed in that special way he was so fond of, and which sometimes made him wound her unnecessarily so as to be able to enjoy her embarrassment, which was like a reflection of the humility he himself felt before the Almighty.

Not long after the wallpaper dispute, he had gone off to Gnome Mountain alone to cut wood and absent himself for a time from his wife and the world, only to find, when he got home, that she had actually papered the entire kitchen from floor to ceiling with newspapers. This, to a farmer, makes the walls look even more destitute than when they are bare—

expressing poverty, certainly, but of a joyless and unloved kind. Only people who wanted wallpaper but could not afford it put up newspapers instead.

Had he not given Hanna money for butter and for eggs, Stahl thought indignantly? She could well have afforded wallpaper but had abstained out of obedience to him. What was one to make of such halfheartedness? Not that such an attitude was new to him, far from it—he himself was always making excuses in a manner of speaking, trying to change his last farthing when God demanded it from him. And because he understood her state of mind so well, he scourged her for having defiled the poverty of their home. He had only needed to glance from the floor to the ceiling to kindle flames in Hanna's cheeks.

But now someone else had brought a flush to her face.

Egron stood on the porch, shivering in the cold May air, not knowing where to turn his eyes.

South of the farm there were no buildings, and the sky seemed to lean on forest-belted blue ridges which soared upward, away from man. Yet even this panorama held no peace for eyes that sought monotony. Against the background of varying shades of blue, the branches of the birch trees glistened as though they had been dipped in blood.

The mountain marsh was still frozen, gleaming as in Egron's childhood, when he used to think it was the washing line of a giant mother, hung with white linen.

For the first time that year he heard the cry of the rain bird. "So there's to be rain," he muttered hastily.

There was another meaning in its message, he knew, one which people normally did not dare to interpret, and therefore they said that it predicted rain. The desolate note persisted. He thought of the old belief, how this ill-omened bird, lamenting

outside the gates of Paradise, had once tempted Adam. Disturbing his peace in God, the bird had sung about the accursed life on earth in such a way that Adam grew sick with longing to taste of it.

“Well, well . . . so there’s to be rain, after all,” Egron repeated obstinately.

HANNA kept forgetting about her husband's spiritual needs and behaving as though it were more important that the child should be fed than that Egron should fast at the appointed times. The child herself showed no consideration for her father; the two of them soon began a tug of war for Hanna. Both learned how to make simultaneous demands on her. Egron had only to ask his wife to go into the fields and bind sheaves, for Linda to emit such a bad smell that her diaper had to be changed—and the child saw to it that the changing took time. In the evening, Linda might ask her mother to play with her by making shadows against the wall or to sing to her, out of the hymn book, Songs of Zion. Invariably, at the most exciting moment, Stahl would want to read the evening prayers. What, he asked, had become of Hanna's spiritual life? Did she really believe it was enough to sing to Linda about lambs and snow-white robes? Couldn't she sense how meager the words of God were in the Songs? Surely she must realize that it was the stern duty of parents to break the will of a child who showed vicious and obstinate tendencies

Hanna would then pick up Linda in her arms and bury her face in the child's hair, while Egron read aloud from Arndt's *Dissertation* on the strength, truth and purity of virtuous love.

"But love is such an ambiguous virtue that human beings may be more easily deceived by it than by any other means. Therefore there is nothing which we should distrust so consistently as love, for there is no force which can so completely distort, penetrate and entirely bewitch the senses as love. Thus, if love is not guided by the true light of the Holy Ghost, it will bring a thousand misfortunes on the human soul."

Intoxicated by the warm scents of babyhood, Hanna did not take in a word, while Egron, trying to interpret Linda's expression, scarcely heard what he was reading. Linda alone seemed to have grasped the text, receiving it with a scornful smile.

The struggle went on for years, and caused Hanna much suffering. Stahl always maintained that his harshness toward the child was inspired by a purified form of love, but Hanna lacked the imagination to comprehend this. To her, love meant benevolence, a kind of reckless indulgence.

"I am punishing myself," Egron would say.

And yet at night he would dream of games in which Linda ordered him about. His favorite dream was one which he could conjure up when half-asleep. In it, he was crawling on all fours with Linda on his back, while all around them people were rejoicing and singing. Someone whispered the words, "*Riding upon a colt, the foal of an ass*," and he, Egron, was the colt, and the rider, hailed by the crowds, was Linda, his child. The feel of her round little bottom against his back and her chubby legs against his sides made him want to sob with joy. Now and again she would tap him playfully on the neck with a palm leaf and he would give a voluptuous shudder. He woke up feeling embarrassed at the thought that perhaps Linda knew what he had been dreaming, yet he could not help think-

ing how wonderful it would be if they could play together in real life.

But Linda went on giving him condescending looks, and her eyes were so cold that it seemed to him as if they somehow contained the soul of the young Egron Stahl, obdurate as it had been before conversion. Then he realized what a mistake it would be to encourage the child's egoism by playing games with her.

Linda was forward for her age and her mother soon began to teach her stories and riddles and to read to her from the newspapers which papered the walls. Sometimes, when Stahl came home, he would find the two of them standing on chairs while Hanna read aloud from the wall about the arrogance of the Norwegians in urging separation from their Motherland, Sweden.

However self-willed she had grown, Hanna had the grace, on such an occasion, to scramble down from her chair and to feel ashamed.

But time and again Linda gave away the fact that her mother read to her and would often shatter the most eloquent silence with some shred of a fairy story.

"Then the King's son drew himself up to his full height and wandered away, leaving the dwarfs to their fate."

Reluctantly, her father began to wonder if the best way of reaching her might not be by means of the printed word, rather than by punishment. Finally he decided to teach her an old song which had been inscribed on the title page of Arndt's *True Christianity*:

*Thou thyself from all must sever
If thou wilt with Jesus go,
Learn to hate thy life and passions
If thou wilt His Heaven know.*

He sat down by the table and the child came and stood beside him, repeating a word or two at a time. Being eager to learn, Linda forgot her antagonism to her father and laid her hand on his knee, making him tremble all over. Soon she could repeat whole lines without a mistake, and worked herself into a frenzy with the concluding words. When she came to one that rhymed she banged her little fist on her father's knee and squealed with delight. At last she had learned both verses by heart and began to walk round the kitchen, stamping her foot each time she reached a rhyme, *Thou thyself from all must sever*—then she left her father and went across to her bed in the corner of the room: *If thou wilt with Jesus go*—now she brushed past the loom and the milk cupboard and strutted over to the kitchen door—*Learn to hate thy life and passions*—on she went, singing, past the copper boiler and the sink, opening the door of the larder as she continued—*If thou wilt His Heaven know*—here she stopped to stamp both feet, in front of the fire; then moved on again at *Luxury, gold and worldly honors*, past the hay stool, the woodbox and the washstand, toward the door of the bedroom—*Thou ought not even to desire*—she shut a small drawer in the kitchen sideboard with a bang and stood for a moment in front of her parents' bed, with its red-and-white checked bedspread which hung right down to the floor. The line, *These the whole world now adore*, led her across to the east window, where she gabbled off the last line, *They are like three heathen gods*.

On reaching this point, she made a triumphant dash back to her father with arms outstretched, as if he were Hanna herself waiting to cuddle her. This gesture came unexpectedly for both of them, and it confused him, momentarily, as he was in the midst of a flood of self-reproach. He, Egron

Stahl, had actually been guilty of teaching this solemn hymn to a babe, a suckling almost, who had no idea of its inner meaning, but treated it as a nursery rhyme. He had acted so foolishly, indeed almost inexcusably, and he was so busy being sorry that he did not immediately grasp Linda's intention, was not quick enough to open his arms when she came flying across the room—while she herself, having only for a moment wanted his caress, turned her back swiftly, leaving him sitting with his hand outstretched, wanting to yield to the temptation of his love. When she looked at him again from across the room, her face wore the same old expression of suspicion. He heard her begin to babble the verses again, and it struck him now that she sounded spiteful, as if she had coaxed a secret out of him. He put Arndt's *True Christianity* back into the drawer, sighing and wondering.

AS A YOUNG MAN, Egron Stahl had been very fond of company. When he was converted he therefore concluded that the best way to please the Almighty was to renounce this pleasure. Linda's appearance on the scene obliged him, however, to reconsider a certain passage in Arndt, which ran: "As it is unwise to allow maidens and young children to wander about too freely in public, so also it is unwise to allow thine own thoughts and words to move too freely among strangers; hide them rather in the chamber of thy heart, that they may not be offended by others."

Linda was always impatient to be out and about, and her thoughts and conversation were constantly chasing round the village. Her curiosity about the different farms and their occupants knew no bounds.

Both Hanna and Egron agreed that she should not go out too often, even on their own farm, and certainly not alone. . . . Hanna felt secretly that there were elements in the air which might be dangerous for the child and though Stahl said this idea was heathen nonsense, it was clear to her mother, every time she thrilled at the sight of Linda's compact little body, that there must be spirits everywhere, good as well as evil, who were always ready to snatch the child from her unworthy mother and keep her for their own purposes. Both parents therefore did their best to make her stay indoors.

Yet Hanna realized that Linda ought sometimes to play with other children of her own age, and when her husband was out of the way, she sometimes took her to see the East Stahls, who had three daughters. Elof Stahl's wife, Ida, the mother of this brood, had not suffered the chastisement of having had to wait sixteen years for her first child. Indeed, she had scarcely been married ten months when Ulrika, the eldest, was born. Hanna could still recall her own bitter envy at that event. A year and a half later Maria arrived, but by that time Hanna had herself been delivered of a child, and she had no reason to grudge Ida hers. But she often thought that Ida was surprisingly casual about her motherhood, seeming to take it all as a matter of course. It was almost as though children were as easy to get as if they were sold at the grocer's, Hanna sometimes claimed, in a mood of exaggeration.

Ida was young, and complacent about her fertility, and often inclined to make fun of the elderly mother when talking to women of her own age.

"Her common sense has all run down into her nipples since Linda was born."

Ulrika, Maria and Eva Stahl played quietly together, and had none of Linda's wild exuberance. The eldest drew figures on a slate, while the younger ones busied themselves with their dolls. They shyly lent their toys to Linda, but soon wanted them again. In her eagerness to make discoveries, Linda was rough—a piece of chalk would break between her fingers; she bit dolls in the leg to find out what they were like inside, and licked their faces so that the lines of lips and eyes smudged and ran. She never willingly gave anything back and so the games invariably ended in a storm of shrieks and tears, upon which Hanna had to come to the rescue and take her daughter home.

When she begged Stahl to let her buy Linda a blackboard, he refused, saying that if the child's imagination was not checked at this point, it would soon get beyond their control. Later, when Linda started school, a blackboard might be allowed, but not until then. Hanna had meant to ask permission to make a doll for Linda's sixth birthday, but realizing that this, too, might be withheld, she decided that it was not a man's business. After all, there was nothing dishonest in the fact that she sewed her own underclothes in private. So, secretly, Hanna set to work on a large doll, telling herself that it was an entirely innocent occupation.

The doll was ready for Linda's birthday, and that morning Hanna tiptoed into her room and laid it beside her while she was still asleep. Stahl had gone out, and Hanna stood at the bottom of the bed, watching the child. Linda's breathing was even, and the jugular vein moved gently in her throat. Hanna held her own breath to be able to listen more intently, and to convince herself there was nothing wrong, that the child had not forgotten how to breathe. She sighed with relief, for everything was functioning perfectly, and the little body was warm, warmer than the air around it. Six years ago today, she thought, she had brought it out of her own womb, and since then it had never once grown really cold.

Curtsying suddenly, she whispered: "Yes, God, I know You exist."

Everything about Linda was fair, and her mother invented for herself the superstition that all fair people have easy lives. She would not allow herself to have any fears about Linda's future. If only the bones in her forehead had not curved inward so sharply, much more sharply than necessary, really, to leave room for her eyes. And there were tiny hollows above each eye, which were clearly visible when she shut them. The

skin there was not as white as on her forehead, but a kind of deep pink, like the pith of a pine. What if the evil powers in the air—and in the world itself—were to discover these hollows and come flying to settle in them, filling them with darkness and sorrow and making Linda weep?

Hanna shivered. The very thoughts themselves might attract the attention of the spirits of the air—better, she thought, to concentrate instead on the austere line of Linda's nose, the tight pigtailed which stuck out like tiny whips from her neck, and the chubby little body with its straight legs. Linda had never had the slightest trace of rickets or any other physical deformity—what evil could possibly befall a child so boldly and beautifully made? At the very sight of her Hanna wanted to moan and laugh and sigh at the same time. And the words of the Song of Songs welled up in her: "*Tell him that I am sick of love.*"

Linda always looked round for her mother when she woke up, and Hanna would then lie down beside her to "comfort her for the day" as they called it. But when Linda saw the doll lying on her pillow this particular morning there was no question of any more dozing.

She stared at the doll with such intensity that it seemed to Hanna that it came alive and its face moved. She had not merely outlined its features with charcoal but actually sewed them on with brown and red wool.

After gazing at it in silence for a long time, Linda said in a solemn, high-pitched voice: "Her name is Gockan. She is all my three children, Eva, Maria and Ulrika." Then, with a deep sigh: "In the name of Eva, Maria and the Blessed Ulrika," Linda got up, dressed herself and, from that moment on, seemed altogether more grown-up.

When her father came in she allowed him, as a favor, to

look at the doll. Hanna watched them surreptitiously. Egron glanced from the doll to his wife with the same reproach he had shown long ago, when she had papered the walls with newspaper, and her cheeks began to redden. But this time not with embarrassment, but as a warning. He turned his gaze back to the doll, so obviously, in his eyes, *a graven image*, only to meet Linda's transfigured face. Then, fortunately, St. Paul sent temporary guidance: *To the pure all things are pure.*

Linda played with her doll from morning to night, and her father listened quietly as she sang to it the nursery rhymes her mother had once sung to her:

*The crow was sitting beside the well,
A golden leaf in its beak—
Where do you want to fly?
To the north where the onions grow,
And the cuckoo calls,
And the little dolls dance in
Yellow socks.
Little girls dance in a ring,
The chimney sweep is a fiddler
The pancake is all eaten
And porridge on the table.
Dear little girls
Put on your tiny shoes
And go to the cow barn
To milk all your cows,
Roseline and Fagerlin
And all your other little cows.*

And when Egron had heard her repeat this song over and over again, he actually began to forget the evil of the chain dance and the sinfulness of the chimney sweep who was a fiddler, and ceased to regard as a lie the claim that the crow carried a gold leaf in its beak. For Linda's singing somehow made it all come true; the golden leaves glittered and, for an

unforgettable moment, they seemed more real than the words in the hymn: "How empty are the joys of Earth."

Linda gaily continued with a ditty invented by some eight-year-old baby watcher, rocking the cradle with an impatient foot, and glancing sullenly at her mother's flour-smeared hands and bulging apron:

*Lullaby, my mother's babe,
Bake me a cookie, mother!
If I don't get cookies soon
I'll not rock the cradle,
And leave the baby howling.*

It was some time before Linda grew so accustomed to her doll that her thoughts turned back to the village. One day, however, she suddenly decided that the neighbors would be very offended that they had never been allowed to see Gockan, and she nagged at her parents for permission to go round and show her off.

The village prayer meetings which were held, in turn, in different farmhouses every Sunday, had meanwhile become a trial for Hanna and Egron. While most children from the age of three upward were able to sit quietly through the two-hour service, Linda never could behave properly. She would stare at the members of the congregation, one by one, pinch those sitting next to her, and pipe up tunes of her own during the hymns. Hanna generally had to give up and take her out before the end. Linda would then walk down the aisle, peering around her with keen enjoyment, thinking that everybody would have to look at her. But when they got outside and started on their way home across the hill, she would begin to rage and sob: "I want to be with all the people—I want to go to prayers!"

"Next Sunday," Hanna would say. "By next Sunday Linda

will be a big girl and will know how to sit still in church." The week, however, was always so long and each Sunday so exciting, that Linda simply could not manage this. One morning, however, she did actually sit still through the reading of the prayers. But when Ant Viktor had closed his thick book of homilies and was about to say the traditional "Praise be to God," Linda's voice suddenly rose, loud and clear, from the pew in which she and Hanna were sitting: "Praised be the Lord Who, by His Word, has taught, consolidated and admonished us . . ."

A rustling was heard in the church, as if the congregation had been rudely awakened from sleep. Egron, in his chair on the men's side, turned quite pale and dared hardly look across to his wife and child.

After a moment of apprehensive silence Hanna stood up, took Linda by the hand and walked over to the Communion Table, where she curtsied in front of old pastor Antonson, saying:

"Forgive me. Forgive the child."

It was courageous of Hanna to make an offering of her own timidity in this fashion. And when she voiced the word "child," it took on a note of such dignity that it seemed to signify not only Linda, but "the child in you, Anton, and in us all."

The expression of anger and consternation on the old man's face slowly faded, and lifting his hand with a fatherly gesture he said mildly to Hanna:

"Go in peace."

Both had shown presence of mind and the atmosphere of prayer was restored. Hanna went out with Linda, who, however, still had the audacity to gaze round her. And as soon as they were out in the courtyard, she began screaming:

"I want to go back—I tell you, I want to sing!"

"But dolly is waiting for us—we must go home to Gockan."

When they got home, Hanna found herself playing the part of the congregation with the doll on her knee. Linda stood in front of her, imitating Ant Viktor's voice and gestures until her mother almost choked with laughter. Every now and then, when she reached the reference: "*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Blessed Ulrika,*" Linda would drop out of her role and come rushing across to her mother to hug the doll. And often she interrupted her intonation of a prayer with a question.

"Mummy, wasn't Aaron really a mother?"

"No, no, dear, of course not. Why do you think that?"

"But he must have been."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it says in the Bible: . . . and Moses laid his head on Aaron's bosom."

"I hardly think that was quite the meaning of it," Hanna said lamely, stifling a giggle, and thankful it was she and not Egron who had been faced with the question.

"Anyway, nobody is as bosomy as you, Mamma. You're just the softest, warmest bosom, everywhere, all over." Linda went across to Hanna, patted her stomach and dug a finger into her thigh as though it were a piece of dough or soft earth, doing so with a look of such sly familiarity that Hanna blushed.

When Egron came home later that evening, Linda had started up the service again. He felt perplexed by these difficult situations into which the child perpetually dragged him, and for which he had never been prepared by the Word. Was Linda just playing a game, or was her declamation of the service a sign of budding sanctity?

"The Lord is in His Holy Temple, His Throne is in Heaven."

Egron did not dare to interfere. But he insisted that Linda should be punished for her misconduct in church by not being allowed to go to the prayer meeting for two Sundays running. Her tears and promises to sit quietly were of no avail. He decreed that she must stay at home with her mother.

"You are trying to turn me into a heathen, Father," Linda told him on the second Sunday.

"Where on earth does she get hold of such words?" Egron exclaimed, turning to Hanna for help.

"You want to prevent me from hearing the Word of God," Linda went on, her eyes glittering.

Her father felt uneasy.

LINDA stood at the bedroom window, looking up toward the village. At the top of the hill lay the long, red building used by Ant Viktor in winter, and behind it, the bakehouse. The barn roof, which could only just be distinguished, was so low it was a wonder that a cow could stand upright beneath it. Linda had long planned to find out about this, but whenever they went to prayers at Ant Viktor's there was so much else to see that she forgot. Further east lay a small cottage, all gray and cold looking, which belonged to Jonas and Manda, an ungodly place where no prayer meetings were ever held.

The Ahls lived further down the hill, and the first thing one noticed on their farm was the manure heap, and then the barn, and then the roof of the winter cottage, the only part visible. Linda's mother had told her that this home had "luck with animals," and she once made up her mind to find out what that meant. During a drowsy part in a sermon at one of the prayer meetings she had crawled along the floor and was halfway under the sofa before Hanna could drag her back from her hiding place between a pair of booted female legs.

"What on earth are you up to, child?" she whispered.

"I'm looking for that luck with animals you told me about," Linda said.

That was the end of another prayer meeting for mother and daughter.

The next house belonged to the Josefs, and had a lovely porch door and small, white-framed windows with panels beneath them, carved to look like a reclining figure of eight. Josef and Tekla were a kindly pair and it was so peaceful in their home that Linda often managed to sit still there, almost through the whole meeting. West of the road winding up the hill, lay two other farmsteads, one of which Linda called Organ Farm. When the organ there thundered forth on Sundays, played by black-bearded Erik Annorsa, she felt such a chill run down her spine that she was glad the farm was partially hidden by trees. Sometimes, however, she would stand at home listening, with a kind of fearful longing that organ music would issue forth on weekdays, too.

The other farm, which lay still further down the hill, was owned by the Vestbergs, and had a weathercock. There were many clocks, but no children, in that home. Aunt Agusta was old and had a horrible big nose. But Simon, her husband, was a nice man.

Besides Old Farm next door, there were other farms, further east, belonging to the village, but they were not real to Linda, because she could not see them from any of her windows; and she kept nagging her mother to take her to visit them so that they would "come alive," as she put it.

"They're alive all right, even though you don't see them," Hanna replied.

"But if I forget all about them they just won't be there any more," Linda persisted.

"Oh, yes, they will—God will remember them. And He can see them all at once."

"But I want to find out if there's a Linda, somewhere else."

"There isn't any other Linda. You're the only one."

Mother and daughter looked at each other, both dazed for

a moment by the wonder of this. Then Linda exclaimed, her face flushing a deep red:

"Am I really so important? Imagine that . . ."

But after this modest sigh her self-esteem bubbled over, spreading in all directions.

"I know what—I'll go and tell that to everyone! I'll let them know that there's only one me."

But when Hanna explained to her that she was not unique in being herself, that, indeed, every human being is special—"every farm has its own talk, and every person has his own smell"—her curiosity about other farms and people became quite anguished.

Those others must have a common bond, she thought, which she, Linda, was not allowed to share. Something that hovered in the air between the farms, something secret, which united them. The bread basket, for instance, which was left on every kitchen table between meals, peoples' clothes, the people themselves—everything was surely permeated with that something, whatever it was, which supplied the knowledge of what things really are, and why. This mysterious sense it was which kept everything going, and no one who lacked it could be counted as one of the village. Only because she could give an imitation of having it, was she, Linda, for the time being at least, accepted. But one day she, too, would be let into the secret of this hovering thing, this voice which told everyone how things ought to be, and explained why things existed. Linda had a name of her own for it: The Village Whisper.

Sometimes she confided in her doll.

"Did you see the Village Whisper last night? Fluttering down like a dove. Do you really mean that? And what did the dove look like? The Holy Ghost? No, then you're wrong. It

was really the Village Whisper. Gockan, you're nothing but a cheeky little girl, and you ought to be smacked for impertinence. . . . You won't be allowed to go to prayer meetings for two weeks. I'll make a heathen dove of you."

One morning, a light mist lay over the village, swirling about the farms like thin smoke. Linda stood in the yard, staring with astonishment at what she had been waiting for for so long. Then, holding her doll, she began walking toward the cross-roads which separated the buildings of the two Stahl farms.

Egron was standing by the well, hauling up buckets of water, but she did not even look at him, for she was mesmerized by the white mist. Soon, she thought, she would be able to open her mouth wide and drink it in and the Village Whisper would enter her at last. And, from then on, she would know.

Hearing her father calling her, she began running in the opposite direction. She must be in time. She was beside herself with fear of missing the Village Whisper, now that it had finally revealed itself to her. She heard her father behind her, and ran as fast as she could, heard him running, too, and gaining on her. She stumbled and fell, and cried out as he reached her and picked her up.

"How often must I tell you not to run off like that, you disobedient wench!" Egron exclaimed.

"But I'm not running away! I only want to drink in the Village Whisper," Linda shrieked.

She had gone completely savage, tore herself out of his grip, and slithered to the ground. She went all taut, hitting out and yelling. Egron held on to her as if she were a small, wild animal, making no effort to reason with her, only protecting himself from being bitten and scratched. At last, exhausted

by her own frenzy, she lost consciousness and hung limp in his arms, her mouth wide open.

Hanna, who had come out of the barn to see what was going on, hurried up to him.

"She was about to run away, I tell you," Egron stammered. "Said something about wanting to drink in the Village Whisper. How am I ever going to make headway with her?"

His wife took the child away from him.

"Make it happier for her to be at home—so she'll want to stay!"

Things had now reached such a pitch that Hanna could answer Stahl in this fashion.

"Mightn't it be that she hasn't had a proper upbringing?" he ventured.

At that moment, Linda opened her eyes. Their brightness, framed in the dark sockets, suddenly reminded Stahl of his grandfather. As a child, he had been fascinated by the old man's bloodthirsty tales of the Finnish war but had, at the same time, been frightened of him. After his own conversion, the memory of his grandfather had so revolted him that he had even considered changing his name—Stahl was a famous warrior name in Finland. Finally, however, he had decided to keep it, like a mark of Cain, a kind of perpetual reminder to the sinner in daily need of salvation.

"Punish me, O Lord," he prayed, "but save the child." Then the thought arose in him that if only she were properly brought up, they might both be saved.

A FEW gloomy days passed, during which Linda was drowsy and mostly inclined to sleep.

One night Stahl dreamed that he was a little boy sitting on his mother's knee.

"Whom do you love best, Linda or me?" he asked her.

"I love you both best," his mother answered, rocking him in her arms.

"Don't you love me just a little better, after all?" he persisted.

"No, I love you both exactly the same."

"But I came first," he said. And when he looked into his mother's face he saw that she was Hanna. This embarrassed him, but he still wanted to stay on her knee. Suddenly Linda peeped out from behind a chair, and looked at him with a snigger.

He turned to Mother Hanna again, and said, in a choking voice:

"If you knew what she is really like, deep down inside, you wouldn't love her a bit."

Hanna, who was wiser and more beautiful than in real life, replied.

"Deep down, you are as innocent as Linda."

Stahl woke up, feeling ashamed. There were, apparently

no limits to the indignity of one's behavior in a dream, or to the degree to which one could be humbled.

The sky was aflame, and the earth shivered in the grip of the passionate, delicate spring of Västerbotten. But this aroused neither happiness nor unhappiness in Egron. Hanna kept aloof and worked mainly in the barn. Linda either slept, or pretended to be asleep. Egron longed for some earthly joy. He wanted Linda to laugh like a six-year-old again, and wished that she could be naughty in a more natural way. It did not really matter how she behaved, he thought to himself; if only she were happy again he would give up trying to discipline her.

As he lay speculating on the nature of his child, and on his own attitude toward her, Hanna came in with some spring news from the farm. The chickens were hatching, she said, and Linda simply must come out and look at them.

And, thanks to the chicks, Linda forgot the Village Whisper for a while. Egron, however, continued fretting about the duties of fatherhood. He could think of nothing but the child. Hanna reminded him tactfully of the work that had to be done on the farm and in the fields, asking him if he was not going to cut some wood over at Gnome Mountain before the harvest, or examine the state of the fence between their property and Elof's; surely, she said, it ought to be looked over now, since it would soon be time to let the cows out. If only he would dig up the potato patch, she and Linda could plant the potatoes, and he would not have to waste time on such a womanish job. But Egron refused to deal with any of these matters; all he wanted was to find out what was wrong with Linda.

The child kept out of his way and stayed in the barn, talk-

ing to her doll and the chicks, telling them to keep quiet because of Father. Hanna was drawn into these secret games, and found herself thinking of riddles behind her husband's back.

(A tiny man is standing by the wall, with horned lips and a beard made of fur. . . .)

One evening, as they were going indoors, Linda said she and her doll, Gockan, would have to sleep in the barn to keep the chicks company.

"But they have their mother with them," Hanna objected.

"That makes no difference, they're too frightened of the dark."

"But it's light nearly all night!"

"The light doesn't reach them."

"Why do you think so?"

"Their down is in the way."

"Don't you think they like being downy. . . ?"

"No, they hate it. They're not used to it. They're frightened of the dark. . . ." Linda burrowed her head into her mother's skirts and suddenly they both began to laugh.

"You mustn't be so silly, Linda."

"But it's true, every word. You can ask Father if you don't believe me."

"Wouldn't it be better to bring the chicks into the kitchen," Hanna suggested. "Just for a while, until they fall asleep."

"May we sleep in the same bed, then?"

"No, certainly not. They would make your bed dirty. They can sleep in a basket."

They brought in twelve chicks in a basket, and told Egron, in passing, what they were doing, without either asking permission or advice. Hanna put the basket on the floor beside the fire, pushed the porridge saucepan into the chimney corner, and began giggling at the thought of a new riddle.

"What kind of a black hen sits on scarlet eggs?"

She helped her daughter guess the answer by pouring water into a saucepan and poking the fire.

"The saucepan and the embers are a black hen and red eggs!" Linda cried. And Hanna praised her for her cleverness, put a log on the fire, and went off to the larder to fill the flourbox.

"Can you guess who it is who has been born twice and never christened?" Linda asked.

"What godless rubbish are you talking now?" her father demanded.

But Linda ignored him and knelt down and prattled to the chicks, which were cheeping and crawling about on top of each other.

"Where did you learn that riddle about the unchristened chicks?" Egron persisted. He was greedy to talk with her but was only able to express himself by fault-finding.

"Nowhere." Linda went on idly moving the chicks about.

"Is that the way to answer your father?" he shouted. Immediately regretting his anger, he got up and went into the front room. Spring was rejoicing outside the window, and there was no escape for him anywhere.

Linda noticed how the chicks were crowding toward one side of the basket, all wanting to collect where there was least room. She helped each of them in turn, first putting the one which was furthest out into the middle of the group, and then doing the same with the others on the outside, until she gradually grew dizzy with the effort of finding the middle. Then she began picking up two chicks at a time, roughly piling them on top of each other. She wanted them to get closer together, closer, closer, closer, until they became a single ball of down. She sat there, wildly repeating:

"Now you're to be in the middle, and you in the middle, and you in the middle, middle, middle . . ."

She did not notice that her father was standing behind her until he suddenly seized her wrist, making her drop the chick she was holding. He was breathing heavily, and his face was red.

"What are you doing?" he snarled.

Putting his hand among the chicks, he pulled out one which was apparently lifeless.

"This one has been in the middle all the time. You've killed it with your monkeying around."

The child stared, horror stricken, but was unable to cry, for her father's outburst blotted everything else out. Instead, she rose and stumbled toward the door.

"This will be your punishment," Egron shouted, and grabbing the doll, which was lying beside the basket, he flung it on the fire.

Linda ran across the room to save it, but her father took hold of her, and they stood together in front of the fireplace watching the doll burn. Its face assumed an expression of even greater astonishment than it normally had, and it came alive in the flames. They seemed no longer to be looking at an inanimate object, but at something which was dying. Linda gave a shriek, clutched at her father, and began to hit him.

"Get Gockan out, she's dying—in the name of Mary and the saints," she yelled.

When her mother came into the room, Linda had fainted, and Stahl began shouting at his wife.

"You knew well enough what you were doing to that child when you gave her the doll. You knew well enough that it was a *graven image*. You even teach her to blaspheme the sacrament of Baptism with your jingles. Leading her astray, that's

what you're doing. I knew, when I saw what she'd done to the chicken, that this was the sign I'd been waiting for so long. It's high time I took over the upbringing of that child!"

The air in the kitchen was stifling. The smell of the burning cloth was sharp, and the chicks were cheeping wildly.

Hanna stood in the middle of the floor holding Linda in her arms. She looked at her husband with the melancholy expression he remembered from the dream, but there was no consolation in her words. She said, in a low voice:

"I don't recognize you . . ."

"Don't recognize me—what sort of nonsense is that? Haven't I been with you a sight longer than Linda has? You talk as if you were crazy. Linda's blinded you so you don't know what you're saying any more. Why, she's *your* graven . . ."

Hanna advanced on him, hissing:

"Stahl! You shut up!"

"Don't you call me Stahl—my name's Egron."

"All right, all right—we'd better go to bed," she replied. "Make yourself something to eat if you're hungry. Linda and I will sleep in the front room tonight."

Linda started coming round and began to whimper, and Egron hovered about, whimpering, too. There were fifty years between father and daughter but the two sounded as if they were the same age.

"I hadn't the conscience to let her go on any longer with that doll—it was bad for her, in a deeper sense . . . and surely you must have enough spiritual insight to realize that God has to be obeyed before man . . . it's the voice of conscience . . ."

"That's where you're wrong—it's stubbornness, not conscience at all, behind what you're saying," his wife interrupted.

She treated him and his conscience as a frugal housewife might a dog with a meaty bone it had just received from its master, taking it away from him, scraping it clean and throwing it back.

"But I received a sign . . . I had prayed for a sign . . . and the dead chicken . . ." He pointed at the yellow ball of fluff which lay on the floor. At that moment, ruffling its feathers, the chick got up and wobbled dizzily across the room. Egron Stahl gaped, while his large Adam's apple moved up and down as though he were about to speak. But no sound came. He looked across at Hanna, ready for a snub or a sneer—all he could expect now was punishment. But Hanna did not seem to consider his reaction the most important thing. She went over to the chick, crouching down so that Linda could sit on one of her knees, and murmured soothingly:

"He lost his breath for a minute, that was all, but now he's perked up again. Touch him, and feel how soft and warm he is." She held out the chicken but Linda only burrowed her head in her mother's bosom, howling:

"I want Gockan back!"

EGRON STAHL had spent many nights in vigil in obedience to the Word, taking himself to task before the Almighty. A besetting sin, for which he continuously had to ask forgiveness, was his enmity toward Ant Viktor. The old man had a habit of looking up from his book of homilies during prayer meetings, and with a meaningful glance making it clear to the congregation for whom the current quotation or text was intended. There was thus no doubt that he regarded the expression "slave to the letter of the law" as particularly applicable to Egron. And no matter how often Stahl vowed repentance for his anger against Ant Viktor on this account, indignation surged up in him again and again. Who was Ant Viktor to talk like that! What about his sense of humility? Trying to cover up his own arrogance by finding fault in others, that was all.

Sometimes God would rebuke Egron, playfully. Could his sensitivity to Ant Viktor's glances possibly arise from the belief that he, Egron, was an authority in spiritual matters, and should himself be the one elected to read the prayers? When God spoke thus, Egron realized that, for the time being, he had been forgiven, for God must know him well enough to feel certain that he would never so much as dream of aspiring to a position of authority. After all, his own house lay at the bottom of the hill and, when the Day of Judgment

dawned, God would find Egron Stahl standing among the meanest of His servants "at the very door of the banqueting hall."

But to have the expression "a slave to the letter of the law" thrown in his face by Ant Viktor was too much—he who had actually turned away a band of gypsies the day before Christmas Eve with the excuse that his cottage and his barn were already overcrowded—well, that sort of language could be expected from the hypocrite. One might even say that Ant Viktor bore a strong resemblance to that fellow in the Bible who had considered himself too good to sit with publicans and sinners. Egron had given the gypsies the porch bedroom, and even though he must admit that the unholy row they made on the bedstraw had quite destroyed the atmosphere of Christmas and disturbed the communion of the Gospel-reading, he had at least followed the commandment of love better than Ant Viktor.

But all this had happened long ago, and what business did he have with Ant Viktor now anyway? He, Egron, ought to accept his mockery as an ordeal. Why, Ant Viktor was even known to beat his children with a stick!

"And, Lord, Thou knowest I have never done that, no matter how often I had a right to. I have never touched Linda in that way."

He wandered about the farm, now and then looking across at his neighbor Elof, who was pottering about, perhaps moving stones on his land, which was one of his favorite pastimes. Alas, he had to confess daily to sinful thoughts about his cousin Elof.

A few words from one of Linda's nursery rhymes came into his head: *North of the woods where Gockan calls . . .*

Elof had been given many a pound but had buried them

all in the earth. His reply to the secret invitation by Our Lord to the wedding in Canaan would assuredly have been: "I have just bought a farmstead and am therefore unable to attend." Elof himself had no idea of the craftiness and cunning of Old Adam. Indeed, his soul was so drowsy that he could even use the expression Old Adam in fun, as the nickname of a close neighbor. . . . But woe befall Elof the day his soul woke to reality; what good would his pile of stones be to him then? None at all, Egron mused; they would be reckoned as no more than leaves.

There was not a single household on the hillside which had not, at one time or another, been the object of Egron's sinful thoughts. How often had he not used such words about them as "Pharisee" and "child of the devil." And what would have become of him, with such a load of bad thoughts, if he had not received the promise of salvation? Tonight his old sins, which had never been scarlet, seemed to him like gray tufts of wool. It did not matter any more what Ant Viktor thought, or how Elof plowed his field, or what he—Stahl—had made of this, or indeed how God had judged his thoughts on the subject.

"Surely, Oh Lord, I have been sufficiently obedient for Thee to spare me the shame of having to stand there, in front of Hanna. . . . Was it really necessary to bring that chicken back to life in such a way, while I stood there, truly believing it to be dead? Well, well, I suppose it was, then . . . I expect Thou hadst to curb my pride and discipline me. For, Lord, Thou must surely have some purpose with my life, even though I cannot discern it now.

"Forgive me my sudden wrath."

North of the woods where the cuckoo dances with his yellow sighs.

"It is not easy, O Lord, for a man of my years to take on the burden of a child's upbringing and Thou must have patience with me. Thou knowest that I have the best intentions even when I make a mistake. It is the right attitude of mind that counts, after all, not outward behavior. Surely Thou seest that I repent? I feel bitterly remorseful at losing my temper. It is true, of course, that the Savior Himself was angry when he drove the usurers out of the temple with a whip, but I for my part have never beaten Linda, neither with my hand nor with a birch rod. Still, I know that is no excuse—I should have tried instead to guide her with gentleness. Forgive my roughness, O Lord! Forgive me, and grant me Thy peace."

Egron noticed that this very day the fields and birches had begun to shimmer with green. Everything ignored his soul, and earthy spring throbbed around him as though he were an animal.

A sense of desolation filled him. He felt he was not suited to a place and a time in history so remote from God. For God's presence on earth just then—at the end of the nineteenth century and so far north in the world—was somehow diluted. What a difference in the days of Moses! What wrath that holy man had shown at the sight of the Calf of Gold! And then there was Abraham with his knife raised, preparing to sacrifice his only child. Why, God Himself had been carried away by the forceful deeds of those times. Had He not revealed Himself on mountains, spoken from burning bushes, and sent bright angels down to earth to comfort and refresh his people? What a contrast these events were to this nagging war of conscience in which he, Egron, was involved, in surroundings so far removed from the blood-spattered hillocks of the Holy Land. Why hadn't he been allowed to live in the days of Luther and join in the fury of the struggle against

Popery? Rebellious thoughts crowded in on him, and he made it clear to God how much Egron Stahl would have achieved if only he had been permitted to live in other conditions.

And having devoted himself to such thoughts for several hours, he was able to indulge in another hour or two of repentance for the sin of vanity, a repentance so violent he broke out in a sweat. Yet God seemed quite unmoved.

God must have been asleep, or unwilling to be bothered about how bad Egron was or how hopelessly entangled in the sin of pride.

“Though your sins be as scarlet . . .”

In the end Egron made his point, which was that the burning of Gockan was the gravest sin of his life, but that God must forgive him for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ.

North of the woods Gockan grows in yellow flames . . .

He went into the kitchen and stood listening by the bedroom door behind which Hanna and Linda were sleeping. They were innocent, those two, nothing could disturb them. But matters were not as simple if one happened, like Egron, to have a sensitive conscience which kept one alternatively freezing and sweating all through a May night in remorse over a trifling incident which one's wife and daughter had already forgotten. Yet, maybe the greatest vanity of all was to imagine that what Egron Stahl did was of any real significance.

In any case, he now felt that he had earned an hour or two of sleep. Not that anyone seemed to wish him this, for Hanna had not even made up the sofa bed. There it stood, high and narrow as in the daytime, and one couldn't sleep in it without first pulling it apart and arranging the bedclothes. Egron removed the coverlet, and was folding it up when he heard a sudden cry from Linda, followed by Hanna's comforting murmurs.

Staring at the wall, he listened intently, his heart thumping. Usually, he never read a word of what was printed on the "wallpaper" but just then his senses were so wide awake he had to take notice of what was in front of his eyes. The word **MILLSTONES** suddenly leaped out at him in large letters. For a moment his heart seemed to stop and then began thumping again. Underneath this word, in small print, he read: "to be bought cheaply at Södermark and Co." Egron could not believe that the lines were connected, or indeed that they made up an advertisement in the same style as "Nissen's World-Famous Throat Tablets," or "Always ask for Lampe's Prosit Snuff Number One."

For to him, millstones were certainly not articles of commerce.

He got up from the bed and took a few aimless turns round the room. Hardly aware of what he was doing, he sat down on the hay stool between the wall and the woodpile, clutching the red and white coverlet, and praying:

"Dear Lord, make Linda forget the doll by tomorrow morning."

And, slowly, he fell into a kind of trance, from which, however, his eyes were excluded; they kept traveling up and down the length of the word **MILLSTONES**, even if he shut them tight.

THEY sat down to an early breakfast of sour milk mixed with hard bread. Hanna spoke about sowing potatoes. They were beginning to sprout, she said, and could not be left lying any longer.

The spring engulfed the cottage like a tidal wave; one felt that the walls were about to crumble.

As a topic of conversation old potatoes, with their nauseating smell and pale, bleary eyes, suited the close atmosphere in the house. Hanna did most of the talking and eating, while Egron and Linda sat trembling, waiting for something to happen.

And then it happened. Linda's eyes wandered across to the fireplace, and in a flash she remembered. And then she turned her gaze on Egron. But the burst of tears or anger which he was expecting did not come. The child's eyes were dull and the skin around them a bright purplish brown. She yielded up her face to him with a sadness that was quite pure, as free of anger as of hope. He was filled by her, and no longer considered his own guilt; he simply was her, and wanted to cry out in his anguish.

Oh, that she might give him permission to explain . . .

Hanna took Linda on her knee and lifted a spoonful of milk to her mouth, with the words:

"Eat a little, darling. Taste it and see how good it is with the newly baked bread."

But Linda turned her head away. And now the pain was walled up inside him, the bridge between them which had been created by their mutual glances. Each of them was suffering alone and the pain was acute. Linda beat her head against her mother's body and her lips parted, as slowly as a bird's beak gasping for water, while Egron waited breathlessly for a sound. But none came.

He looked at Hanna and said:

"Is there no way of getting round it?"

His wife did not reply, as she gazed mildly down at him, for she was now above judgment.

Now each of them was independent of the others, and Linda was no longer the only problem. For there was also the question of Egron's guilt and atonement. If the matter had concerned Hanna he would have asked her pardon, perhaps on his knees, although such gestures seemed justified only before the Almighty. If necessary, one presented one's excuses to another human being. But now he wanted to say the hard words: Forgive me. And because Linda was only a child, this was impossible.

It was the fact that Linda was too young to be able to forgive that was so terrifying. He knew this to be so and dared not even confront mother and child with the possibility. The very thought of mentioning what he had done was like throwing the doll on the fire all over again.

"Couldn't you make her a new one?" he whispered to Hanna.

"Yes, I'd thought of that," she nodded.

EGRON spent the whole summer trying to placate Linda, forgetting completely that he had dedicated his life to a Higher Power, and thinking only of how to please her. He recalled the many occasions when Hanna, in the old days, had begged him to hold Linda or even only to touch her, just to see how it felt, and how he had refused. He had carried her once only, and that had been against her will. He had dreamed that she was sitting on his back and he had dreamed it against his own will. Now, when his dearest wish was to be allowed to rock her on his knee, she screamed if he so much as brushed against her.

Egron prayed alternatively to God and to his wife for help and advice.

"You and Linda are both so excitable, you fly off the handle so easily," was all Hanna could say.

"Do you think I am like her in any way?" he asked greedily.

"Isn't it plain to all that she takes after you?"

"But isn't she ever going to get over this business about the doll?"

"We'll just have to be patient. Let her vexation work itself out, and then things'll improve."

Nevertheless, Linda's resentment was hard to put up with. And at first the new doll left her completely indifferent.

"That's only a bunch of rags. That isn't Gockan."

A day or two later she picked up the doll, but without affection.

"You're a stupid, ugly thing. I'll call you Pockan, and give you a whipping," she exclaimed.

She could sit for hours mumbling spiteful nonsense to the new doll without a trace of the playful delight she had shown in pretending to bring up the first one. Her father made her some small tools, a potato hoe and a hay rake with a carved handle which shone like silk. But she scarcely looked at any of the things he offered her. They soon got broken, and then she smacked the doll.

"Why are you always so unkind to Pockan?" Hanna asked.

"Pockan broke my rake, and she must be punished," was the reply.

Egron watched them out of the corner of his eye. He was frightened and thought about original sin. Who could have made Linda so cruel, he wondered. After all, he had never beaten her.

"You'll make Pockan miserable, always being so hard on her," Hanna went on.

"Miserable? Why, she doesn't feel anything, she's only a rag doll."

Egron listened to these conversations as though his life depended on them.

One day, Hanna asked Linda outright why she didn't like her new doll. After a long pause, the child answered simply:

"I daren't."

"MILLSTONES, cheap at Södermark and Co."—again the word danced before Egron's eyes.

In summer there was usually very little time for sleep, and they had to work early and late to be sure of getting in the harvest in time. This year, Egron was continually behind, both in working and sleeping, and the hired laborer who gave them a hand with the crops was contemptuous of his slackness.

In the evenings, when Egron had read a passage from

Rosenius' *Prayers*, Hanna made up the two beds in the kitchen and then bedded down beside Linda, to hush her to sleep, while Egron lay listening to their voices and to the child's evening prayer . . . "God, Who loves my little doll, Gockan . . ."

Only after Linda had fallen asleep would Hanna come over to the marital bed. And then Egron would cling to her, in envy and love, longing to bury his head between her breasts as Linda did, aching to be as soft as Hanna himself, so that Linda would want him, too. He pretended to fall asleep in order to hear his wife say her prayers, and this made him feel like an intruder and an eavesdropper in his own house, though he suspected that Hanna had begun with this extra evening prayer because his own readings of the Meditations had become so disconnected and lacking in dignity of late. Every night he hoped he would hear her say something to God in her prayers that might be useful to him, some clue which might help him win back Linda. But Hanna only recited the Lord's Prayer, once for herself, and once again with her hands clasped above Egron's head. Sometimes he wondered whether the prayer itself was of any significance to her, or if she only prayed because she thought that God needed prayers. She might think the Almighty had the right at least to one Lord's Prayer per head, per evening—and they were to be correct prayers, neatly recited and in the proper place. In much the same way she sold her eggs without a speck of dirt on them and the butter was always clean.

When she had finished, Hanna usually fell asleep and Egron would then feel that there was something heathenish about her faith. But his brain could not cope with the problem—for he lived in a state of vague bewilderment about the summer, about himself and about Linda. And he anticipated and dreaded her sudden cries—she had nightmares and hysterical weeping

attacks almost every night. And they were always caused by the same thing.

"Get Gockan out, she's dying!" she would whimper.

He pretended to sleep when Hanna slipped out of bed and went over to lie down beside Linda and comfort her.

But he suffered agonies of shame and jealousy. Usually, when children cried at night, because of earache or nightmares, their mothers would take them into the double bed and let them sleep between their parents. This was an old custom which Eggon, however, had forbidden from the start, saying that there was a difference between them and the people who had so many children that they scarcely noticed if one or two happened to be overlooked.

"You talk of children as though they were piglets," Hanna had said reproachfully. But they had not discussed such things for a long time. What would he not have given now to have been allowed to carry the dream-tormented child to its mother, to have lain down beside them, and to have seen her quiet down.

Linda avoided looking at her father. If he tried to catch her eye she would often go across to the wall and pretend to read. And if he came near her she moved aside with studied politeness to be sure of not getting in his way. This mixture of good manners and indifference maddened him, but he felt obliged to stand his ground and carry on the struggle.

"Would you like me to read something to you?" he asked.

"If you want to," Linda replied.

He read a few passages at random.

"More patriotic literature for our parish libraries: it is comforting to know that the majority of our people love their native land. Such love should be strengthened, where it already exists, and encouraged in those who are lacking in this sentiment. Yet, do we fully realize that one of our most

effective means of fostering our love has been sadly neglected, namely the supplying of our parish libraries with patriotic literature? The root of love is the knowledge that something is good, and we cannot love anything without such knowledge. But do the majority of our countrymen know their native land—its scenery, history, and institutions, and its advantages compared with other countries? Do they realize that our country is, beyond doubt, one of the finest on earth, and that its institutions are a guarantee of peace and happiness? Apart from a smattering of such knowledge imparted at school, there is very little general understanding of this.”

“Shall I go on?” Egron asked.

“If you want to,” said Linda.

And to make it clear that she had not got the better of him, he went to another column, carrying a brash advertisement:

“TO AMERICA: A quick and comfortable journey to America is ensured every week on board the Royal Mail Steamers of the White Star Shipping Line. Cabins on the new giant liners, *Teutonic* and *Majestic*, are available every week.”

While he was reading, Linda crouched down beside the copper boiler, drawing on its steamy side with one finger. When her father approached she rubbed out her doodles. “It’s a long time since you sang about the crow that sat by the well with a golden leaf in its beak. Won’t you sing it now for me?” he coaxed.

“That crow has flown away,” Linda said.

“Yes, that was how the story ran, wasn’t it? She flew away north of the woods where the onions grow, and the cuckoo calls—wasn’t that right, Linda?”

“No,” the child retorted, “now she’s flown away for good. She has gone to America.”

ONE AUTUMN DAY, on his way from the village shop north of the hill, Egron found himself walking beside eleven-year-old Petrus, one of Erik Annorsa's many children. Although the subject uppermost in his mind was hardly suitable as a topic of conversation with a child, Egron felt compelled to bring it up.

"Tell me Petrus, do you love your parents?" he began.

The boy looked puzzled and answered: "Why, of course."

"Which of them do you love best?"

The boy shifted his satchel on his back and replied:

"I don't think there's really much difference. Mother's easier—softer, in a way—but I've more respect for Father."

"Have you ever been whipped?"

Petrus sniggered self-consciously.

"Well, maybe, now and then."

"Why?"

"I suppose I had to be taught not to go licking the cream out of the jug. But I guess everybody gets a hairpull sometime, before they've given up that trick," he added precociously.

Egron was ashamed of his questions, but could not resist the temptation to continue. After all, a man who has offended his own child need not consider other people's children.

"For what other things have you been whipped?"

"Well, don't get the idea that it happens every day—but a while ago I had a fight with one of the kids about something that belonged to me. And Father gave me a licking because he said I shouldn't hit anyone smaller than myself."

"But what about his hitting you? You're smaller than Erik Annersa."

Petrus looked disapprovingly at Egron.

"That's different. A father has to be responsible for the children's upbringing. And Erik's my father."

(Oh, Linda, Linda, if only you would take my side one day, like Petrus.)

He went on degrading himself in the eyes of the boy.

"Has it ever happened that Erik Annersa has thrown anything of yours into the fire?"

"Sure it has. The same time I had that fight with Magnus. Mother gave me a wallet she'd made herself from an old bit of leather the shoemaker left when he worked at our farm last winter. And I couldn't ever have that wallet in peace—Magnus was always poking about and messing it up. It wasn't the first time me and Magnus had trouble about it. Then one day, Father got mad and said if that darned wallet was going to cause such temptation, he'd take it away. He did, too, and threw it in the fire, and it burned right up. There was a stink of leather in the house all evening . . ."

"What did you do?" Stahl asked. Now they had reached the top of the hill.

"Me? Why, nothing—just kept quiet, I guess, and felt ashamed."

"So now you haven't got a wallet?"

"Yes, I have!" and Petrus pulled a purse out of his pocket. "After a couple of days, Father gave me this one, one of his own. The clasp's maybe a bit worn, but it serves all right."

"Didn't you—you must have missed the one your father burned?" Egron said craftily.

"Why, no. This one's much more classy—it's a real grown-up man's wallet. That's the difference. And it's been Father's, too, he had it before me."

The boy, glowing with health and pride, looked up at the older man. It was plain that he never suffered from nightmares. And now that there was nothing more for Egron to ask about, his only wish was to be left alone.

A horse and cart came up behind them and, turning round, they saw Erik Annorsa with a harrow on the trailer behind him. He stopped and offered Egron a lift to the crossroads, but the latter said it was only a step and he might as well walk.

Petrus struggled free of his satchel, flung it on the back of the cart and clambered up beside his black-bearded father. He was given the reins, and clucked with his tongue at the horse—he was obviously a driver who didn't want to waste time! As they drove off, sitting close beside each other on the box, Egron was almost sure he heard Petrus say:

"Listen, Father, don't you think Egron Stahl's a stupid kind of a man?"

Erik Annorsa had once been in prison. Only for a short while, admittedly, and probably he had been innocent, but he was the only man in the village who had ever been in jail, and he had come to his farm straight from it. Everyone, including Petrus, knew this. But it had never diminished his neighbors' respect for him, for he was a man with such an upright bearing that he almost seemed to be leaning over backward, and his son worshiped him.

"People are queer," Egron said to himself.

Birches glimmered in the blue darkness of the forest, and the rowans glowed like flames round the gray cottages in the village.

"Autumn's a strange time," Egron went on, "pouring all that color on the earth."

"Dear world," he murmured, walking on alone down the hill.

"Merciful Heaven . . ."

The well-worn expression tasted quite fresh on his tongue.

EGRON STAHL came home to his wife with a satchel full of household necessities, a bag of candy, and a new concept of fatherhood. He sat down at the table with the dignified movements he had used toward Hanna before Linda's arrival had distorted their pattern of living. Opening the satchel, he pulled out packages containing coffee, sugar, salt, matches and sewing thread, and handed them over to Hanna, allowing the woman to "buy" each article with a small gesture of gratitude. Hanna had such a large store of such gestures that it did not humiliate her in the least that he was so condescending. Linda, however, stood with her hands behind her back, her tummy protruding, observing the transaction, unwilling to buy anything or to show any admiration.

"Well, my girl—have you been behaving yourself while I've been away?" her father asked.

"Yes, indeed she has—Linda is the best girl in the world," her mother interrupted, giving Linda a pat on the cheek. But the child remained aloof.

"Why do you ask?" she retorted truculently.

"Because a father has to be responsible for his child's upbringing and must find out how she has been behaving while he was away," Egron explained, with his new, fragile authority.

Linda looked straight through him.

But her father pretended that he had full control of the situation, and said with patronizing geniality:

"I've brought you a bag of candy."

The woman, watching Stahl, noticed suddenly that he had a deep cleft running down each cheek; and that one cleft branched upward like the crown of a tree. His forced gaiety caused this tree to quiver and Hanna was suddenly filled with respect for him. Linda, however, did not see it. She had never observed the naked tree imprinted on her father's face.

He held the open bag out to Linda, who made as if to take it from him.

"No, no, not that way. One at a time . . ."

At that, she stuck her whole hand in the bag. But Egron seized her fingers in such a grip that she had to let go and drop the sweets.

"Are you always as greedy and bad mannered when somebody offers you candy? I told you to take only one."

Now Linda had snatched her hand away and was holding it behind her back. Standing with her legs wide apart, she looked defiantly at Egron.

"I said that you were to have one," he said, holding out the bag again. "And if you're a good girl, you shall have the whole bag. But only one at a time. A big bag like this must be made to last."

"I don't want any of it," Linda declared.

Hanna began to tremble, and said hurriedly:

"Of course you want it. Be a good girl now, Linda, and take one of the candies Father brought you."

"Why should I be good, when he isn't?"

Getting up, with his eyes still fixed on the child, Stahl handed the bag to Hanna, who was shaking so violently now that the candies fell out. One piece rolled over to where Linda

stood and, when it reached her, she insolently kicked it away across the floor.

Her action was like the uprush of wind before the storm. Egron seized her by the pigtails, dragged her toward him and laying her across his knee he started to thrash her in a frenzy which seemed almost to give him physical pleasure. Now he had got her at last. Linda yelled while the blows were falling, and Hanna circled round them, weeping. Desperate, she threw herself between Egron's steel fist and the small bottom. Before he could stop himself, Egron had struck his wife full in the face. The unimaginable had now occurred, and they almost burst with shame. Then Hanna knelt in front of him, sought his hand, which was shaking violently, and caressed it.

Linda scrambled down from her humiliating position, pulled up her bloomers and said to her father:

"I'll murder you for this, Father. I'll kill you dead, so you'll shut up for ever—so you'll be quiet."

Then she went across the floor, picked the sweets up and stuffed them into her mouth till her cheeks bulged.

Stupefied, her parents crouched on the floor, watching the child take possession of what was hers by right. She strode back and forth across the kitchen floor like a pioneer measuring arable land for himself.

NEXT MORNING, the sky was a frosty gray; the garish autumn leaves had come adrift in the night and fluttered to the ground.

There was still a patch of the potato land which needed digging up, and Hanna told Egron that he need not bother about it as she and Linda could easily manage the job if there was anything else he wanted to do. Her manner toward him now had the gentleness of the old days when Egron, the Struggle for Faith and Hanna were the only important things in the world.

Egron knew now that he needed solitude and said that he would go off to Gnome Mountain and cut wood for the house, adding:

"I may be away a day or two."

Hanna saw to it that he had food to take with him and a pair of extra socks, and he himself laid the big Book of Homilies uppermost in his satchel.

"However God-fearing they may be, these pietists, Luther's the only one who is any use when real temptations come over you," he told her.

"Don't stay away if the weather gets bad," Hanna said, hitching the satchel on his back.

"I will not let Him go except He bless me," Egron replied, and Hanna once again caught a glimpse of the trembling crown on his cheek.

Fastening the lifting-hook to his belt, he picked up his axe and strode off, leaving his farm and the world behind him. Hanna stood looking after him with tenderness, her eyes following his strong, muscular neck, which was not made for submission.

Then she and Linda got to work on the potato patch, and joy reigned until sundown. They told each other they would not give up until the last potato had been pulled. The tops had frozen and there was an autumnal smell of desolation about, but the clusters of smooth, oval potatoes which sprouted under each plant tempted them to go on. Hanna dug and Linda helped to pluck the yellow potatoes which seemed vigorously alive against the soft brown earth.

"Nice little piggies, aren't they?" Linda chuckled, wiping the earth off them with her gloves. Hanna took such care of her daughter's hands that she even allowed her to ruin her gloves in the potato patch. It was obvious, indeed, that she only had one child to keep in clothes.

"The soil mustn't go indoors," Linda chattered, "only the potatoes. The earth's to stay outside; it's not to be in the house. It can't come in with us, can it?"

Toward evening a drizzle began to fall and they had to hurry, neither wanting to be the first to say "now we must give up and go home." And when the last potato had been dug they stopped, panting and laughing, red in the face with exertion, and triumphant at having gotten the better of the unfriendly weather. Hanna took the potato sack on her back, and Linda trudged after her with the wooden pail—both were carrying loads which were too heavy for them, but neither would admit it in the delight of their togetherness.

"What a horrid time Father must be having over at Gnome Mountain," Linda said.

"My goodness, yes—I hope he'll come home this evening."

"If he doesn't, we can set up coffee weaves as much as we like, can't we?" Linda went on.

Her mother pretended not to hear.

When they got home, Hanna stored the potatoes in the cellar, put some wood on the fire and changed Linda into dry clothes. The house felt cold and damp and there was only a faint glow under the ashes.

A man entered the cottage unobtrusively and stood for some time by the door before Hanna realized that he was there. When she told him to come in and sit down, they saw that it was Josef. Hanna turned back to the fireplace and began to poke the ashes and blow on them. After a discreet pause, their neighbor sat down on the chair nearest the door. Nothing was said by the grownups—there was no need for speech. Linda, however, ran about the room, babbling incessantly. She even began fingering the man's bootlaces and examining him all over, from the soles of his feet to his face, as if she did not know the difference between a human being and a doll.

Hanna felt embarrassed by the child's audacity but did not dare to reproach her. The more childish her behavior could be made to appear, the less impertinent it would seem to the visitor.

In the end, Linda got tired of him, and went into a corner of the room, where she sat down on a footstool, closed her eyes and was silent. After a moment or two, however, she began to speak, and it seemed to her mother as if another pair of eyes, darker than her own, were peering out from the hollows above her closed lids.

"He's dropped the axe. All crooked. I can see the blade flashing—yes, now it's gone right into his thigh . . ."

She clasped her hands and began mumbling:

"Now it's made a hole in his trousers, and a big hole in his skin. Oh, how white it looks—and there's blood spurting out, like an arrow. I can hear a roaring, roaring noise, like huge bells inside the mountain—can't you hear it too?"

Josef and Hanna stared in horror at the child, now fully in the grip of a clairvoyant seizure.

"Now he's fallen on his side. I can see him pulling up moss and trying to stop up the hole in his skin, but the blood keeps spurting out—he's roaring too, now, like a bull and those bells keep on ringing, so loud they echo all round the mountain—ding-dong, ding-dong, just like that. . . . Now he's fallen forward with his forehead on the ground and he can't get up. . . ."

Linda was speaking so rapidly that she began to hiccup for lack of breath. "What a noise that ringing makes, it says ding-dong, ding-dong all the time. The whole mountain is full of bells. Now he is deathly pale. He is calling '*Hanna, Hanna*'—look, look, the bell clappers have all fallen down with a bang, and it's all quiet. He's lying there with his lips apart and he's quiet too . . ."

Linda sat listening, her mouth wide open.

"Yes, he's quiet, all right."

Then she laughed, clapping her hands together.

As suddenly as she had gone into her trance, she came out of it. Rubbing her eyes, she got down from the chair and went over to her mother, whimpering fearfully as if she had been roughly awakened from sleep.

"I feel so cold, Mamma. Please give me some suck . . ." She tried to clamber onto her mother's knee but Hanna pushed her away and went up to the fire. She crept in under the chimney cowl and started to blow on the ashes.

"At last there's life in it," she muttered, when the logs flared up.

Linda kept at her mother's heels. They were both shivering, and the man beside the door twisted uncomfortably in his chair. When he turned round to look out of the window they could hear the rustle of his clothing, and the creaking of the joints between his head and shoulders. The atmosphere in the cottage seemed suddenly to turn sounds into shudders. Crazy shadows leaped out from the fire and stalked each other across the walls.

Hanna climbed onto the woodbox, took down a holed loaf from the bread pole under the ceiling, cut it into three pieces and spread butter on it. All her movements were sluggish. At long last she managed, shakily, to produce some coffee, and went across to their guest with the cup in one hand and a piece of bread and butter in the other. They were all three in need of a hot drink and Josef scarcely gave himself time to say the customary: "Thanks, but it's not necessary. Don't you bother about offering me anything, Hanna."

With Linda still hanging to her skirts, Hanna fetched the footstool from the corner, put it beside the hearth and laid out coffee and bread for the child. She herself moved over to the east window, cup in hand. It was now almost dark, and the rain came down in gusts.

Then the man sitting by the door asked the terrible, tactless question:

"Who was it you saw, Linda?"

"Father, of course," the child answered. "There's no one else but him chopping wood at Gnome Mountain."

She smiled fatuously, while her mother trembled from head to foot.

"She's only talking nonsense," Hanna said. "Linda's

never been able to see things—she just shows a nasty streak, from time to time.”

And while the three of them drank their coffee, new shadows jumped out of the fire and pranced round on the walls. Josef turned his head to the window again. Whatever errand he had come on had slipped his mind. Hanna might have explained that Stahl had told her he would stay away and chop wood at Gnome Mountain for a day or two, or that she expected him home any minute now, since the weather had got so bad. But neither of them said a word.

WHEN they found Stahl the following day, he had bled to death from the blow of an axe in the groin.

Elof, Josef and Ahl had helped Hanna to look for him, and it was they who finally discovered the body and carried it home, placing it on a bier in the stable doorway. Ida kept Linda at Old Farm while all this was going on. But the girl wanted to go home, and managed to get away.

When she opened the kitchen door she saw her mother sitting on the hay stool, between the wall and the woodbox. Hanna was rocking to and fro, bending forward so that her head dropped between her knees, then throwing herself backward until her head struck the wall. And all the time, she kept moaning a terrible tune:

"No, oh no, no, no, no, no—no, oh no, no, no!"

Linda sat down on her special "thinking stone," behind the cottage. The only thing that mattered, she thought, was to get Mother back, so that they could be alone together. She would pretend that she knew nothing about Father. After all, she was so young that nobody would expect her to have understood what they were saying at Elof's. She would simply go in to Mother and tell her a story, and make her forget her crying. But Linda found it difficult to think of anything suitable to say. At Old Farm, Ida and the grandmother had gone on and on, weeping and talking about poor Hanna and her fate,

how awful it must be to be widowed when one had young children. The little girls had sat around staring at the grownups—indeed, everything that went on in the room had some way been connected with Egron Stahl.

Linda decided she would say to her mother that she was cold, because this happened to be true. They would make some coffee, put a big piece of cheese in each cup and pour coffee on top of it, and then fish up threads of cheese with a spoon and stretch them from cup to cup. They called this game a "coffee weave." It was one of many they had been forced to play in secret because Stahl had said it was sacrilege to play with food. Now, they would be able to set up a "coffee weave" all day, if they wanted to.

Linda entered the house with a determined smile.

But her mother went on rocking to and fro, oblivious of her. Linda crossed the floor so that Hanna would see her, and finally went up and touched her mother's thigh. A spasm of the horror which had taken possession of the older woman shot across to the child. It was like a blow. She shrank back, and began walking round her mother in a semi-circle—surely she must still be the soft, warm mother of old, the mother in whose arms baby Linda had always been able to hide. She even started calling her name, but nothing could rouse Hanna from her wailing.

Linda trotted out of the cottage again, unable to pretend cheerfulness any longer. There was something frightening in the air, and every object seemed to gaze at her accusingly. Perhaps, she thought, one had to put up with Father, in order to see Mother happy—well, in that case, he had better come back.

She went across to the stable. The latch was high up, so she had to roll up an empty barrel and climb up on it to open the door.

Eggon had been laid on his side, and he now rested with his legs drawn up and his mouth open like a child. Linda forced herself to believe he was asleep.

"Father, can't you get well now, and wake up! You don't need to sleep any more. Mother wants you to come in. Surely you remember the chicken—it came alive . . ."

She spoke slowly and distinctly, so that he could hear her more easily.

"I want you to come in, too, and stop being dead."

Then she whispered, with an effort:

"I promise to do what you tell me—" and added, scarlet with shame:

"I was only joking."

The air felt damp and cold. Linda was suddenly reminded of the evening before which now seemed so far away, when her mother, sitting on her haunches, blew on the ashes and sighed with relief as the flames leaped up; at last it came alive. One clearly had to breathe on a dead thing, until it started living by itself.

The child stood on tiptoe, and breathed into her father's dead face. The cheek with the network of wrinkles lay uppermost, and Linda noticed, for the first time, how like a leafless tree those wrinkles looked. She felt a sudden urge to comfort him, because of that tree, and she slowly drew a finger across his skin. Only then did she sense, with animal insight, that he was dead. The childlike appearance was gone, and he seemed to her more accusing than at any time during his life. Death exuded from him like a vapor.

Linda turned and fled through the stable doorway, back into the cottage.

"It wasn't me!" she screamed, and went on repeating these words until her mother roused herself from unconscious lament, and recognized her child.

IN THE early days of their marriage, Egron had tried to instruct Hanna in spiritual matters in order to help her understand his problems. But the dogmas he propounded, to the accompaniment of heavy sighs, such as *one must obey, not understand*, meant no more to her than if he had said: one must breathe in order to live. And it was a mystery to her that the question of obedience could be such a stumbling block.

But with Linda, mutiny had entered Hanna's life; her love for the child had made inroads on her simplicity. With Egron's death, many of his sayings took on a new significance for her and she suddenly saw what he had meant by speaking of love as a temptation, and understood his desire to shut out anyone who stirred up or awoke it. She also remembered many of his unspoken wishes.

After Egron's death, Hanna fully accepted the words: "Thou shalt obey, not understand."

She thereby inherited a kind of foolishness which did not come naturally to her but which she accepted as a command. Love was given a name and put in its place as being a snare for simple people who did not know how to handle it. It enticed you to sin, and was in conspiracy with pain and death. "Therefore there is nothing we should distrust so consistently as love."

Hanna took refuge in total obedience to her husband's memory, and in so doing shut herself off from Linda. She

continued to do everything the child asked of her but never again embraced her spontaneously. At night, when Linda came tiptoeing to her mother's bed, she encountered sharp ribs and apprehension where, formerly, she had found downy softness and comfort.

The house was now like a bird's nest which had been blown so roughly to the ground that the mother bird had been trapped underneath it. Chirping wildly, the young bird came hopping back only to find its familiar home upside down.

WHEN Linda tired of trying to win back her mother, she turned to the villagers. Nothing was forbidden her any longer and she could run about as she pleased. People were polite and she was always treated to something, although rarely shown the teasing affection which the villagers gave to each other's children. No one, for instance, would ever tell Linda to run down to the next cottage and borrow a fart, a local witticism which few children escaped hearing.

Yet it was not simply because she was known to have second sight that people were against her—it was, in fact, considered rather an honor for a village to possess somebody with such powers. The root cause was that Linda was reported to have actually enjoyed the terrible spectacle of her father's death, and this made it seem almost as if it were her fault that the axe had slipped. The thought was a grim one, though perhaps, in the circumstances, not entirely un-Christian; and the neighbors, while reproaching themselves, were unable to get it out of their minds.

There had been another incident, too, at the funeral, which had been so embarrassing that no one even mentioned it.

The villagers had stood round the grave in a circle, with Hanna and Linda, the chief mourners, next to the parson. When the three shovelfuls of earth were being thrown upon the coffin, Linda had yelled a loud "No!" at each shovelful.

Everyone present was appalled, and the words of the parson, which were intended to unite the living in the face of death, were completely lost. For the child's frenzied "No!" turned all minds from communion in the spirit to the dissolution of the flesh. They had all gone home in a state of confusion, without remembering a word about the resurrection, almost as if the child's three "no's" had made them fear both Heaven and earth.

Later, when Linda started wandering about the village, a general sense of duty toward the fatherless began to assert itself. But the child was not made to feel welcome.

"You mustn't quarrel with Linda," a mother would say to her child, taking away its toy to give to the visitor. Then she would gather up her own child in her arms with a frown, and remind it: "Haven't I told you it's dangerous to quarrel with Linda?"

And Linda would be left alone with the lifeless toys, while the other children disappeared, either to hang around their mothers, or go up into their grandmothers' room, or to play in the garden.

The grownups were careful to speak in a way which she could not follow, the only exception being Augusta Vestberg, a tactless lump of a woman who was once heard to say loudly, while Linda was in the room:

"If I was Hanna, I should feel like the mother of a murderer."

Augusta was disagreeable, but her neighbors put up with her, even though she had a habit of telling home truths which, in the interests of charity, would have better been left unsaid. She had been widowed soon after the birth of her tenth child. Five of her offspring had inherited their mother's sharp nose and disposition, while the others were as submissive, pious and

snub-nosed as their father had been. Her eldest son had run away to America and had persuaded the other big-nosed ones to follow his example, one by one. None of the children had left the farm with their mother's blessing and two of the daughters had actually been obliged to run away from home in order to get married to men living in the next village.

Simon was the eldest of the remainder. He had yielded to the spell of clocks and watches, and no longer listened either to the counsel of his brothers and sisters in America, or to Agusta's nagging. But the remark about the murderess caught his ear.

"Is that a thing to say when the child is listening?" he said reprovingly.

Agusta was sitting at her spinning wheel. She had big hands with broad, flat thumbs which she could bend backward. Thumbs such as these have many uses but are especially practical for shoemakers, and for spreading butter on bread.

"Come and have a look, Linda," Simon called out, and when Linda came across to him, he showed her what a musical clock looked like inside. But Linda only wanted to be allowed to stand beside him, being really more interested in Agusta than in clocks.

The old woman's kerchief was pulled forward on her forehead, so that Linda saw only her nose and chin. Standing with one hand on Simon's knee, the child watched how the tip of the nose and the point of the chin kept twitching when she spoke. Everyone knew that spite and malice positively squirted out of her mouth and eyes.

Then Agusta said to her son:

"Remember that Kajsa, the Lapp, was her great-grandmother."

"There was nothing wrong with her."

"She was a Lapp, I tell you."

The Vestbergs' house frightened Linda. Their kitchen cupboard was immense and dark brown in color, and the handles of its door were round knobs which seemed to stare severely at her. She was almost certain the cupboard itself could talk during the night, and perhaps even gobble up small children. And then there was Augusta, with her broad thumbs and big feet and hooked nose. Linda wallowed in her terror. When she got tired of challenging opposition in the village, it was a relief to relax in the shadow of Augusta's undisguised animosity.

When she came home to Hanna that evening and relived her day in the village, she said:

"And that's what I ought to feel like—a murderess," giving this word more emphasis than any of the others she had picked up.

Her mother came quickly out of her reverie:

"What did I hear you say, child?"

"I said, a murderess," Linda repeated.

Hanna began hurriedly to pray, reciting first: "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep" and the Lord's Prayer, only interrupting herself to ask, tearfully, where Linda had heard that dreadful word. And when, at last, she found out that it came from Augusta, she strictly forbade her daughter ever to go to the Vestbergs' again.

Which meant, of course, that their house became even more alluring.

Linda trotted round the various farms for some time after this, asking what a murderess was. But nobody answered her. When Linda did not come home after dark, Hanna would go from house to house looking for her. The girl was always glad to see her mother when she came to fetch her. But it was

not long before she realized that the real purpose of Hanna's search was not to find her daughter, but simply to perform a duty.

"Carry me, please," Linda would say.

"A big girl like you? Surely you can walk yourself," was Hanna's answer.

When she finally gave in to the child's repeated requests, and lifted her up onto her arm, the fellowship between them was scarcely greater than that of a crow and the branch of the fir tree on which it is perching.

LINDA sat close to the door in the Ahls' cottage. She was on the lookout. She had been there for such a long time that the family had almost forgotten about her and were sitting around the table having coffee without having offered her a cup. Later, she might be invited to have something with their children. Linda, however, disliked waiting.

The grownups were enjoying their drink, blowing on it to cool it, voluptuously manipulating lumps of sugar between their lips and slowly pushing the sugar into their mouths with the edge of the saucer, then swilling down some coffee. They sat there drinking as calmly as though she did not exist, the child thought.

They did not see her there, by the door, but went on talking about the weather and about the cows, for the Ahls were noted for their "luck with animals," and they spoke of the cows with greater respect than they did of themselves. What Linda really wanted was to sit with them, drink coffee as they did, and be in the middle of things. She thought of saying something that would make them notice her, such as: "There's a jackdaw sitting on the gate," or: "Here come Ant Viktor's boys with the hay cart." But then she saw how Ahl radiated massive security; he was like a great stone, and suddenly it did not seem good enough just to make him look at her, he ought also to be somehow transformed. They ought all to be

transformed and properly shaken up as a punishment for having sat there so long without taking her into account.

"Look out, Ahl, so the axe doesn't slip for you, too," she said.

The farmer turned a deep scarlet, and his wife, Hedda, upset her saucer so that the coffee ran down her thigh. The kitchen-maid, who was emotional, began to sob; and everyone turned to stare at the master of the house as though he were a doomed man. It was an uncanny moment. Linda had the power to change an atmosphere and, sensing it, became warm and giggly.

Hedda was the first to act. Holding her coffee-drenched skirt away from her, she got up and went over to the child.

"Why do you say that, my girl?"

"Because I saw it." At the word "saw" from Linda's mouth, a shiver ran through them all.

But Hedda, holding the child's eyes with her own, continued:

"What did you see?"

"That he had better mind the axe."

"Was it the same as when your father was over at Gnome Mountain?" Hedda whispered. Linda nodded a "yes," but detached her eyes from Hedda's and stared at the floor.

The woman did not want to ask any more questions and, turning away from the girl, she firmly declared that this was rubbish, and they must not pay any attention to it. But the master had begun to tremble, and the sweat was pouring down his face. When he got up and went across to the bed, his legs were so shaky that his wife and the maid had to support him.

The older children, who realized what was going on, gave Linda hostile glances.

It made her giddy to think of having been able to upset the

coffee party so completely, but she had not got what she really wanted. And now nobody seemed to have any intention of inviting her to the table. They were all fussing round the old man.

Linda wondered if she ought to take back her words.

Supposing she were to say: "I didn't see anything—it was only a joke. . . ." Would Ahl then get up again, pour himself out another cup of coffee, and say: "My, you're a funny wench, Linda, come over to the table instead of staying down there by the door. . . ." But, no, she did not dare to try to disturb the awful solemnity which now prevailed in the Ahl kitchen. So she crept out and went to another farm.

Ahl stayed indoors for the better part of the winter, and the word "axe" was not spoken in this house for a long time. For he had helped to carry home Stahl that autumn day.

LINDA well knew that she was not liked any better at Organ Farm than at any other farm; and the mistress, Aunt Karin, had a mild yet determined way of sending her home, which she was unable to oppose.

"Hanna will be worrying about her little Linda by now. Edit, be a good girl and take her home, so that she doesn't get lost on the road or disappear in a snowdrift."

But there was an organ at Erik Annersa's, and it was that which made his farm so attractive. And then Edit was pale and beautiful, with her delicate hands playing hymns about "That Distant Shore," a kind of death quite different from that with which Linda had been in contact.

She returned to Hanna, exhilarated by songs about Brides of Heaven, the river Jordan, and lambs. And when she sang, she reminded Hanna of the hymns she herself had sung, long ago.

*Jesus, Tender Shepherd, hear me,
Bless Thy little lamb tonight.
Through the darkness be Thou near me,
Keep me safe till morning light.*

They would sit together, their heads nodding, singing the same verse over and over again, Linda in order to keep the words and music in her head, Hanna to revive her memories.

Both used the singing as an incantation to persuade the gentle past to return and envelop them.

But even when they had sung themselves hoarse, things remained exactly as before. Stahl looked accusingly at his wife through Linda's small, pale eyes; he was forever between them. And Hanna had no embrace ready for her daughter when she wanted to climb up on her. All the firm softness which Hanna had gained through her motherhood was gone; her breasts had withered and her cheekbones and collarbone were scraped bare under the skin.

WHEN Linda started school, she learned to read very quickly, and this made her so happy she forgot, for a time, to think about the Village Whisper. She found such joy in taking out of a book words which seemed to her to be waiting to be spoken.

The longing of inanimate things to be clothed in words! Often she went out and read aloud to the farm buildings and to the earth. But when she looked about her and saw the wide, uninhabited spaces outside the village which were beyond the reach of her words and which no one else thought of reading to, she despaired and begged God to look after the sorrowful wilderness. She herself could supply her home fields and woods with words, though even that corner of the earth was far too big for her. She could walk the entire length of the fences and across the yard, reeling off parts of the Catechism and snatches of hymns, and coming back in the evening, flushed and sweating, confident that the earth had been comforted.

But when she went out the next morning, the ground would lie as frozen and starved as ever. Her reading was of no avail against this barrenness—the more she understood it, the greater became its demands on her. If only God would take over her fields and woods too, she thought. Yet He had such vast expanses of earth to look after, that He surely had the right to assume that Linda had time to supply her own homestead with words.

One morning before school, she began to read her Scripture lesson out loud. It dealt with the story of Cain and Abel.

And he said, "What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground."

But she had to get to school, and had no time to read any more, and the demands of the fields knew no bounds.

Suddenly, in helpless fury, she seized the birch broom from the steps and began hitting the ground with it.

Hanna saw her from the door of the barn, and exclaimed:

"What on earth are you doing, child? Beating the ground!"

Linda stopped short, flung the broom away and stamped. "Because I'm so sorry for it," she cried.

She ran off, sobbing violently, and Hanna stood staring after her. Then she went across to the place where the child had struck the ground, and spat on it, just in case the underworld might have interpreted Linda's behavior as an insult, for Hanna was always careful not to challenge "the Little People." Otherwise, she was on good terms with the earth. In her view, man had a right to walk on it and make use of it. After all, the earth was large and human beings nothing but worms. What could have made Linda sorry for the earth, she wondered. It was lucky the child had escaped by means of anger from such an unreasonable demand. But it was unlucky indeed that Hanna herself was running away, escaping daily from her love by means of services.

She rarely allowed herself time to meditate, converting her energy into a furrow of hard work, in which there was room for narrow thoughts only. She thus provided for the child solely with the work of her hands.

Linda resumed her search for the Village Whisper.

SINCE there now seemed little likelihood that a son would be born at Old Farm, Ida had often suggested to Elof that they should adopt a boy. In the end, they acquired a ten-year-old at a parish auction; his name was Simon.

Ida made a great fuss over her having chosen this particular boy. She had an amusing way of making herself out as a consistent law-breaker, managing, often in a single sentence, to enunciate a law, admit to infringing it, and yet defend her action. People would hardly have tolerated it, if she hadn't been so funny.

Over and over again she would describe how moved she had been by Simon's appearance, although he was so ugly that everyone else, according to her, must be horrified and wonder how on earth she could have taken a liking to such a changeling. Like Ida herself, however, most people found Simon ugly in an attractive way. He was big for his age, skinny and pale. His head was round, and he had a full face and a snub nose which showed a white wrinkle across the middle when he smiled. And though his face was generously proportioned, it always seemed as if it was not big enough for his smile and his quiet laugh. His upper lip turned in, showing a large expanse of dark red gum, and the tip of his nose, below the white furrow, shone brightly.

"What nonsense people talk," Ida would say. "Imagine

telling Simon that he must hang on to the tip of his nose so it won't fall off when he laughs. But I told Simon that he must stand up for himself and say: 'I have to put up with the nose I have—I wasn't able to choose mine in the nose-market, like you!' I'll teach the boy to hold his own," she continued. "I've never been one to think it doesn't matter how you treat a bastard. They're human beings too, after all. Yes, that's the way I feel."

She took great care of Simon, and told him that even though he was a boy he was still a child, and ought not always to be working. But as soon as she lightened his work he was off on some errand, and she had to admit it was useful always having water and wood, flour and bread handy. He would quietly replace anything that was missing, without having to be told and without complaining about the dark or the rats in the food cellar, as the girls used to do. And when he was not needed he seemed to become invisible. He did not chafe anybody's conscience, and it was so good having him around that Ida hardly knew how to express her content.

Simon was always ready to agree with everyone. He felt that most people had too little room in themselves for their opinions, that they, in fact, needed someone who could open up and receive their opinions, so that they did not disrupt their own souls. According to Simon, everyone must have someone who could say "yes" to him, everybody needed a help in order to live. Children sometimes develop supercilious ideas like this. Simon thus offered himself as an accessible void into which the person standing nearest him could pour his or her excess opinions. This was a good arrangement, both for those who had opinions and for Simon, who only gave them a helping hand. As the Elofs, on the whole, were a united family, he seldom had to help them out by providing room for different

opinions, which is the hardest thing in the world for children such as he.

The exception was when Linda came visiting. Then the Old Farm kitchen became so charged with conflict that Simon felt like exploding and, though he sat there smiling, his ears and gums and the tip of his nose were bright scarlet.

Simon came to the conclusion that it would be best if Linda did not come to Old Farm any more. So when he saw her on the road on her way to his house, he seized his homework and went out to meet her.

"I was planning to go and see you," he said, thinking that he must protect the harmony at the East Stahls', and guard the three well-behaved girls there.

"And I was thinking of going to Old Farm," Linda replied.

They stood on the path between the farms for a while, until Simon had no recourse but to violate his own nature. He turned Linda around and they walked back to the West Stahls' together.

Hanna was happy that anyone should want to come and see them, especially this boy, who was a stranger to the village and to their sad family history.

The children always had a chapter of the Catechism to struggle with as homework. And though she was a year younger than Simon, Linda used to read aloud to him and teach him. He had difficulty in understanding words in books.

One day, when Linda had scolded him for his great stupidity, and his simple, generous smile had admitted how right she was, he explained consolingly:

"I can't read, you see."

Linda would not believe him. But he persisted.

"In the last place I lived, we had an old teacher. She was very nervous and wanted everything to go quick. And I

couldn't even go to school every week because the farmer couldn't afford to let me off. That's why I don't know the whole alphabet."

This was a plausible grief and Linda could not hate him for it. On the contrary, she felt a compassion which she transmitted into violent efforts to teach him letters and words. After a while, however, he forgot the book and just sat gazing at her. He would repeat everything she dictated, but only in order to please her.

When she looked up from the book and saw his open-mouthed enthusiasm, which was for her alone, Linda flushed happily but grew severe.

"Look in the book, Simon!"

"All right."

"You can't get to know the letters if you only stare at me, can you?" She giggled.

"No," he replied with a smile.

"Now we'll start all over again. Imagine your not being able to tell the difference between *b* and *d*. The letter *b* has everything in front, don't you see—think of Beda's big belly, and that'll remind you."

"Beda had a boy last week, so now her belly's flat again," said Simon.

"That doesn't matter—remember how she looked before that, when she had a bulge on her tummy like a *b*."

"I saw her yesterday and she was as flat as a board," Simon insisted.

"We'll go on to the letter *d*," Linda said, like a school mistress. "Now pretend that Beda is carrying the child on her back, like a little pillow, and then you get the letter *d* for *da*, *B-e-d-a*."

"But Beda doesn't carry him on her back. She holds him on her arm," Simon replied with a sigh.

"You're so stupid that I simply can't talk to you," Linda exclaimed.

Then she bent over the book and began rattling off page after page at great speed, just to show off.

This made Simon miserable, but he soon brightened up.

"Look, Linda, I can give you a piggy-back instead."

Linda loved being carried, so he took her round the cottage several times.

"This was *d*—remember now," she teased.

"I can carry you in front, too," Simon countered.

He held her like a bundle in front of him and they soon forgot which letter they were representing. When they settled down to the book again, both were flushed and giggly. Simon knew less than ever what the difference was between *b* and *d*, and Linda plodded on with *b* as in *be* and *d* as in *da*, *B-e-d-a*. At last, Simon discovered that *d* as in *da* was also contained in the name Linda.

"If I only can learn that, I shall always know that the other is *b*," he declared.

Linda wrote her name on the slate and Simon copied it out and, suddenly mastering it, became as excited as if he had found the most important thing in the world. He scratched away at her name, and repeated it again and again, and this repetition moved Linda in a curious way. It seemed to her as if someone had brushed across her skin, defining her with one finger from the surrounding air, decreeing that she was Linda. She felt her hair rise.

Simon became increasingly clever in associating all knowledge with her. Everything that he was to understand or remember had to be colored by her.

Linda, meanwhile, began to need him and long for his visits.

Besides their lessons, they also read the newspapers on the walls. Linda never tired of these dusty pieces of information and they came to mean more and more to her with the passing of the years. The new papers which arrived in the village a few times a week were much less remarkable.

They read about a cure for warts with its reminder that the wart should be rubbed every evening with white chalk.

They also studied the poem "The Small Birds' Prayer," which stressed that those who enjoy a superfluity of God's gifts should not forget to throw a few crumbs to their feathered friends.

There were reports in several places about poverty in the Lapp districts and lists of charitable contributions. For instance, "The training colleges of the Scanian Regiment of Hussars, have donated one day's pay for the relief of the destitution in the North of Sweden."

Linda did not like that notice; she found it annoying that the southerners should think they were so badly off in the North. But she found consolation in another:

"Scarlet fever is raging in the parish of Vittsjoe, in the South of Sweden, where dirt and squalor make the population an easy prey to this and other diseases."

Near the door, between the doorpost and the cupboard, where the bowls of milk and cream were kept, there was a small item which Linda had once read for Simon and to which he often returned, spelling it out for himself. One day Linda surprised him standing in front of it, his hands cupped round his mouth as if he were calling out, and his stubby fingers just touching the wall, enclosing the notice protectively.

"What are you doing?" she exclaimed.

He blushed and stepped back, smiling his snub-nosed smile.

"Nothing. I was just breathing on her."

Linda did not laugh though the notice was trifling: "A servant girl, Beata Lindström, was sentenced to two months for pilfering, by the local magistrates' Court last Tuesday."

Linda kept two notices as dangerous secrets. She was sure they were wicked because her mother had refused to read them to her and had pulled the sofa forward to hide them. She could therefore read them only when she was sure Hanna would be away long enough to give her time to drag out the sofa and push it in again. Linda openly defied her mother in many ways but not in this, for the notices would have lost their attraction if they had been accessible at all times.

She read for Simon:

"A DECAPITATION WILL TAKE PLACE. According to reliable sources, His Majesty the King, on the recommendation of the Supreme Court of Justice, refused the appeal for mercy made by Per Olsson, sentenced to death for the murder of Gawell, the head of the District Constabulary."

A thrill of self-pity ran through Linda on reading this. It seemed to her that it was she who was to have her head cut off and who escaped by mere chance, so that Per Olsson had to suffer instead.

The story struck her as akin to the one about Abraham and Isaac, with the difference that the angel did not prevent the sacrifice of Per Olsson, but said "Strike" instead of "Lay not thine hand upon the lad." Per Olsson was doomed. And it could have been her.

A few columns away there was a notice which completely obliterated Per Olsson, leaving him as irrelevant as the blank space between the lines:

"A gorgeous Court Ball was given at the Palace on the 21st of this month, on the occasion of His Majesty's birthday. A

total of 2,600 guests were invited, of whom 2,000 were present. The Queen was absent."

"Guess what the Queen was doing?" Linda said.

"Maybe she was in another room thinking about Per Olsson," Simon suggested.

"Not at all. I have figured out that this notice above the copper boiler gives the true reason for her not being there. It says:

"THE QUEEN is in bed with laryngitis and a slight temperature."

THE ELOF GIRLS began to spread a rumor at school that Simon and Linda were betrothed. But when the other children teased them, shouting, "*Ha, ha, Simon loves Linda, Linda loves Simon—Simolinda—Lindasimon,*" and Simon himself just stood there, grinning, Linda would snap back angrily: "*Pooh, that bastard.*" Then everyone laughed at Simon, even he himself, for Linda was so clever at making jokes that he never caught up with her, being unable to answer with anything wittier than a smile.

The Elofs owned a chair sledge which the children used for going to school. Before Simon appeared, they had taken turns pushing each other along on it; but now that they had the little farm hand they were able to ride nearly all the way, except for the very steepest parts. There was room on the sledge for Linda, too. But as time went on she grew annoyed at his pushing the Elof girls and wanted to sit on it alone. To appease her, Simon said that if he had really belonged to the house and had a sledge of his own, things would have been different, adding, "We would be the only ones to ride on it."

Linda nagged her mother to buy her a sledge and, in the end, Hanna was obliged to order one from Dan, the village carpenter. And so Linda got a sledge of her own, only to find it did not travel smoothly, being too new. She arrived at Old Farm early one morning, and sat down on her sledge to wait

for the other four children. On coming out from the barn, where he had been helping to feed the animals, Simon was greeted by her:

"Now I've a sledge of my own, so we can go off alone."

Meanwhile, Eva, Maria and Ulrika came running, sat down on their sledge and waited for Simon to start pushing. He stood there not knowing what to do.

"Have you got a sledge?" Eva exclaimed, turning to Linda.

"Good, then we won't have to push you along every single day," sniggered Ulrika.

"Come on, Simon, let's go," ordered Linda. Though he was downcast, Simon obediently stepped onto the runners behind her, and kicked off. As they passed the Elof girls, Linda stuck out her tongue, making them all scramble down from their sledge, shouting:

"You can push your own sledge, you lazy calf, Simon's our hired boy. Just you come back here, Simon, or else. . ."

The three of them seized Simon, dragged him across to the handlebars of their sledge and, flinging themselves onto the seat, ordered him to push on quickly so as to get ahead of Linda. She herself did not move, but called out again to Simon to come and push her. But he toiled on with the other sledge and the victorious trio burst out laughing. There was now nothing for Linda to do but push her own sledge. Sobbing with rage, she caught up with the others and jabbed the footrail into Simon's heels.

"Dumb calves, fatheads, hoydens!" she shrieked.

"Lazy baggage, fortune-teller, Lapp calf!" the girls jeered.

Simon, finding himself in the center of a storm of girlish anger, at first tried to calm it by laughing and running from one sledge to the other, pretending it was all a game. The others acted their rage so well that he could only see the fun

of it and laugh, for he was far too slow-witted to hit on any of the bad names one had to know in order to be in the game.

But when the girls began throwing snow at each other, it was difficult for him to pretend that they were only making believe. Everything felt dark and cramped, and he had to look up for a moment for something outside the storm that might help him.

All of a sudden, the sun drove a wedge of light from the southeast, narrow as a needle at first, but rapidly turning into a bar which prized open the dome of darkness. The opening widened over the mountain ridge and the sky came into view.

"Look," Simon shouted, "look over there!" He took a few steps to the side of the road, and pointed at the edge of dawn. For a moment, the girls were confused, but soon took up their bickering again.

As the sun rose, triumphant, the dark sky began to soften—it wasn't a dome of iron after all. A mild red glow started to pour forth from it and collect round the sun, floating out along the horizon on both sides of him.

"Look, it's bleeding," Simon exclaimed, the tears dropping down his cheeks. The Elof girls stared up at the sky, but Linda's eyes went to Simon's heels. She could not see any blood for he was wearing long, homespun trousers, heavy boots and puttees. But all the same she had pushed the sledge so violently into his heels that he might be bleeding. She went over to him, whispered into his ear and led him over to her own sledge. Then she began pushing him along the road. Simon accepted this because Linda wanted it; his consent was impartial.

The girls were so startled that they were soon outdistanced, and gave up the contest.

LINDA was happiest in summer, when she could be in the middle of things. The light, at this season, could be pitiless, and lead people to believe there was nothing that could protect them from the prying eyes of neighbors; it also made everybody appear harmless. In summer, people were shy but unsuspicious. Really terrible things seemed impossible then; they could only take place in autumn, when the nights were dark.

Linda was a fair, chubby girl with a red suntan, and light, ordinary eyes. In summer nobody thought of calling her a seer.

The villagers always began haymaking on the same day, and mealtimes for the working teams on the various farms were announced with a cry of "Feeding time, feeding time!" They then sat down, in families, in the shade of a fence gate or a barn. One of the boys would start a fire for the coffee and a girl would be sent to fetch the can of sour milk which had been placed in a ditch in the morning to keep cold. The master, who had the horse to look after, was usually the last to join them, arriving with all the dignity of the horse-owner, having unharnessed his animal, given it water, rubbed it down with straw, and consoled it with spiteful remarks about the horsefly. The mistress of the farm then poured the milk into a communal wooden bowl, broke oatmeal bread into it and distributed

spoons. Sometimes up to seven people would be eating bread and milk from the same bowl.

It was the rule to eat in silence, although occasionally some fussy girl might declare to a boy who had pushed his spoon in too far:

“Keep to your own corner!”

Sometimes the wail of a youngster would echo through the fields. If it did not come from one’s own family, one would listen and try to guess the origin.

“Who d’you suppose is grabbing too big a helping now?”

“Ahl’s Holger, maybe . . .”

“No, I’d guess it’s one of Erik Annersa’s. The master there’s quick tempered, and those fellows have big bones in their throats that don’t break, no matter how hard they yell!”

“The only way to teach boys to eat proper out of the bowl is to send them away when they misbehave, and let them go hungry till the next meal . . . that teaches them!”

“Erik Annersa’s wife probably goes soft and keeps something’ for the rascal in her apron pocket . . .”

The steam from the boiling coffee rose in the soft, clear air. Gossip was rife, but straightforward; there were no nooks and crannies in which to hide things. The light was reflected by the earth as much as by the sky, and the thickest undergrowth seemed to be illuminated from below. The smaller children turned somersaults, while the young people “exchanged horses,” a game with blades of grass in which secret feelings could be represented, and fate given a chance to show itself in the juice of a blade, thus deciding whether the two who played the game were meant for each other. The master and other grown men who were past the age for playing with grass blades stretched out on the ground with their hats over their eyes, while the mistress gathered up the remains of the meal, put out the fire, or nursed a child.

Hayrakes and harness were picked up again with reluctance, for everyone wanted to laze a bit longer. The taste for work only came back at the sight of movement on neighboring fields—there were competitions to settle which were never put into actual words. If the others can finish a whole strip by this evening, surely we can, too.

Linda loved the haymaking season because of all the human sounds in the village at that time. She could stay on the family land then without feeling lonely. Winter quarrels with the Elof girls were forgotten. They shouted to each other across the fences, and boasted about their hayrakes and their calloused hands. Each summer brought Linda the joy of feeling herself accepted among the others.

But by the end of July, when haymaking was still in full swing in the whole village, the cultivated lands at the West Stahls had already been cut, and all that remained to them were the hill pastures on Gnome Mountain. This meant that they had to take their cows out of the village herd, put the hens in a basket, and drive the animals up to the hills for the harvesting there. And on Gnome Mountain, no sounds could be heard from the village.

Not that it was quiet there—one only thought so for a day or two. Soon one began to notice rippling, roaring, crackling, hissing noises and might, in time, even hear a stone speak, if one wished. The sounds were not human, yet in some way strangely familiar. If one surrendered to them, one could feel the presence of things that man had known about before he became a human being. On Gnome Mountain, Linda would sometimes hear the surging of her own body, which was the same sort of roar as she heard when she put her ear to the wall of the baking oven when the furnace was lit. Linda was scared of this thing inside her which could be compared with an oven or a cow's stomach or a piece of earth, and she kept

watch on herself. If she were to learn to understand the language and signs of Gnome Mountain she might be transformed, drawn into a life near the mossy earth, maybe forget her humanity. And she could not afford to lose an ounce of that.

The villagers would never forget the blow of that axe long ago if she had to return to Gnome Mountain every year, airing out the smell of a human being while the odors of the mountain permeated her, scaring people away.

The haymaking there only lasted a week or two and the family returned to the village on Sundays, when the weather was good; but Linda was rebellious all the time.

She hounded her mother. The summer she celebrated her twelfth birthday, she suddenly declared that if Simon did not go with them to the mountain she would not go either. But Ant Viktor's son, Leander, had helped them with the hay at home and regarded himself as hired for the season. And Simon was so indispensable at Old Farm that he was not even sent off to herd goats, a hated summer task which most of the other farm boys had to take on at least once. Ida loved telling the neighboring women, some of whom had more sons than they could manage to feed, that Simon would never be sent away as a goatherd, though he was only a bastard and not her own flesh and blood. It was well known in the village how much was made of Simon at the Elofs'; he was the last boy anyone would think of trying to hire. Hanna needed a trained man and there were plenty of them around; she certainly did not want Simon, who was out of her reach in any case.

But Linda needed him.

Mother and daughter thrashed the matter out every evening when Leander had gone home after the day's work. Finally, the haymaking was over, and they were to drive the cattle to the hill pastures on the following Monday.

"You know what I said," Linda murmured, as they went to bed on Sunday.

That night Hanna had a nightmare in which her daughter jumped on her back and started to bite her and devour her flesh. No matter how she struggled she could not throw her off. Although she felt the child tearing her piece by piece, Hanna experienced no physical pain, only a great terror, as if she were going to die. When she finally managed to wake up, it was still night, yet it was light and calm . . . *The night shineth as the day* . . . Oh, Egron Stahl, where are you?

Hanna got up and looked at her daughter. Where were you before you existed, she wondered. Linda was sleeping with her mouth open, showing her large white teeth, yet she looked as innocent as if she were filled with daylight. Her mother stood still for a while, panting after her dream. The tender light which made the world around her seem so simple and full of grace convinced her that she was a lost soul. Her own body was a thicket of darkness under her skin.

She began collecting some of the things they were to take with them to the hills, aimlessly, like an old man who goes about, muttering, "Who knows if I'll be alive then."

After she had milked the cows she came out of the barn and saw Leander in the yard. He stood there in the radiance of the morning, wrapping sackcloth round the scythes.

Swallows were playing overhead. This was the day when the hill haymaking was to begin and Hanna said a doleful "Good morning" to the hired man. Leander was melancholy too, but then he was always like that, no matter how people greeted him.

"The air is fresh today," Hanna said, looking down her apron.

"Aye, almost too fresh, I'd say," he replied.

Anybody else would have laughed at this grudging answer,

which seemed to turn the fine weather into a suit of clothes for a gentleman; but it grieved Hanna to see that he, too, was in some hidden bondage.

"How old are you?" she asked guardedly.

"Twenty-three," he sighed.

Linda came out of the house in her nightgown. She was rosy and full of health but, as usual, sour tempered. She could not really wake up without grumbling a while first. Her braids had loosened, and her hair stood angrily on end. At the thought of how enticing hair was to spirits in the air which might want to make a girl their prey, Hanna felt like weeping—how could Linda be so careless? But she took no notice of what her mother said about keeping her hair braided and wearing a kerchief, and Hanna did not dare to explain why it was so important to protect one's hair, because that might upset Stahl, wherever he was. Stahl had, after all, thought it a sin to believe in such things, even though they were true. Alas, Hanna, who did not have much knowledge, was not allowed to pass on the little she knew.

"What are you doing here?" Linda said sharply to Leander. "Didn't Mother tell you we won't be needing you for the haymaking in the mountain this year? We're going to do it ourselves."

"Is that so?" Leander said in surprise. "But won't it be too heavy for you two women alone?"

Hanna, breathing heavily, stared at the toes of her boots.

"What's that to do with you?" Linda retorted.

Leander stared at the girl standing there barefoot at the top of the steps in her white nightgown. She shone pink and white against the gray timbered walls. Then he blushed violently and smiled. Why, this was just what the girls said to their young men. How many times had he heard their flir-

tious: what-is-that-to-do-with-you, do-you-think-I'd-ever-tell-you, just-you-take-yourself-off, and so on. But they never said anything cheeky to him.

"Oh, well, if that's the way of it," he said, "then I might as well be going back up the hill. But if you'll be needing me any time, to help with the grass-cutting, I guess you know where to find me."

"But you must be paid . . ." Hanna began.

"No, thanks, no . . . I've hardly worked enough yet to make up for that woolen shirt you gave me. I don't need nothing for these few days. But if it's so that you'll need any help in the fall, you won't have to ask twice. . . ."

He walked off, looking quite exhilarated.

Linda remained on the porch like a sentry, with her obedient mother below her on the pine branches which covered the steps. Hanna needed to go in and wash her hands after the milking, but the steps seemed so steep.

Suddenly she noticed Linda's small, slender feet and the fine bones which fanned out from her ankle down to her toes. The big toe looked unexpectedly long and powerful for the delicate foot.

Then she gazed round about her. The farm grass had been cut, and the uneven green stretch in front of the cottage looked as shamefaced as a newly shorn sheep. Her eyes crept along the wall of the cottage to the monkshood on one side of the porch, and then to the orange lilies on the other. These proud blossoms in flaming colors had been planted long before Hanna's time, and on this particular morning, the scythed patches seemed to emphasize their haughtiness. At the corner of the cottage itself, there were some clusters of grass which had escaped the scythe—tufts of sweet-smelling grass and mint, which Hanna had sown herself. She let her gaze rest on them

for a brief second but then she had to turn back to the pink foot on the porch, and seek some sign from that authoritative big toe. But Linda did not move.

So Hanna put down the milk sieve and the stool on the pine branches and went off toward Old Farm, her hands beneath her apron.

HANNA, who usually moved with ease and agility across the roughest ground, now trudged the high road with short, uncertain steps.

What, indeed, does a self-willed person know about submission, or about what courage and cunning obedience entails?

She was wondering how to approach Elof. Perhaps this way:

"I suppose you would not be good enough to lend me the boy to help on the hill pastures for a week or two?"

Then Elof would probably reply:

"But aren't you taking Leander along?"

Then I will have to lie:

"Ant Viktor says he'll not be able to get the harvest in without Leander."

And before Elof has time to ask if there isn't some other fellow in the village who can help us, I'll add hurriedly:

"You see, I don't think I can afford to pay a skilled man for the work. And now that I'm so used to the scythe, I'll manage those bits of meadow myself." (I'll call the greater part of the winter pasture meadow land, as if Elof didn't know it, for he mustn't be allowed to remember how big my property is.)

"I wouldn't think of letting Simon touch a scythe," I'll continue.

But I happen to know he's handy enough with a scythe. I can just hear Elof say:

"Oh, for that matter, Simon's big and clever for his age, and a good worker. I daresay it could be managed."

But, as it might sound mean to try to hire a boy like that as a harvester, I'll go on to say:

"I thought perhaps he could watch the cows on Gnome Mountain, to keep them from getting drowned in the bogs." Elof won't be likely to know that the water there has dried up during the last few years.

Then he'll probably ask why Linda can't do this job. And I'll reply with my only truthful statement so far, namely that Linda is afraid of the forest. If I wanted to get a hair's breadth nearer the truth, I might say that it's mainly for Linda's sake that I want to hire the boy.

Elof will certainly think to himself it would be better to take a girl along to keep Linda company. But he wouldn't say so, because I would then reply, "Yes, indeed, perhaps Maria or Ulrika could go up with us." And he's afraid to agree to that because of Ida.

By now, he'll be getting more pliable and I'll go on about its not being easy to be left a widow with an only child who often gets lonesome. But that will be the most difficult part, because Elof has helped me more than anyone else, doing carting jobs and other things. And what's best about him is that he gives this help in an indifferent way, as if he's never heard of widows and orphans even though he is married to Ida, who knows a thousand compassionate words.

But what if I'm forced to ask Ida, too, that careful foster mother! Then I'd have to use stronger arguments. For instance, about its not being safe to be only two at Gnome Mountain, for if anything should happen to one of us, there ought to be two others able to help. Ida was on her porch that autumn morning and saw her neighbor, Egron Stahl, carried home.

Maybe I'd even have to hint at that sacred memory, to make her hold her tongue.

No, I can't do it, I can't bring myself to say "if anything should happen." She won't make me say that. I would rather go home without Simon. But then Linda won't come with me, the hill meadows won't get cut, and we'll have to slaughter half the sheep and two of the cows. . . .

What do the self-willed know about how to submit, or understand how impertinent and obstinate one has to be, when one is dependent on others?

SWALLOWS swooped about her as she dragged herself along. Their young had just left the nest, and the parents were celebrating their freedom by showing off in front of old women and by teasing cats into a frenzy.

"Come with me to Gnome Mountain, you lovely birds, and then we can have a talk," Hanna murmured. "It's very heavy going on this road I am wandering now."

But no matter how hesitant her steps, she finally arrived at Old Farm. And there, beside the woodpile, before she even got into the yard, she saw the two she had come to visit and her strength suddenly left her. They looked different, somehow, from what she had expected and she stood still, watching them covertly. Elof was sharpening the blade of the threshing machine while Simon turned the grindstone so hard the water sprayed out like a cloud of smoke around it. There was something so perfect about the two that speaking to them of an errand such as hers would be like slashing a beautiful painting, she thought. If only she could have turned and gone home, unnoticed. But now she was so exhausted she could only stand and stare.

The farmer lifted up the knife and studied its sharp teeth critically. Simon stopped turning and there was a silence, but Hanna still did not dare step forward. The swallows were circling above them, as beautiful and austere as the Words of God.

"It's sharp enough for now," Elof said, shaking the water off the knife. And then he suddenly sensed her standing there and turned round with a surprised "Good morning."

Hanna was forced to come forward, to greet them and begin talking. Elof owned the oldest farmstead in the village but did not pride himself particularly on this. He was a man of simple tastes and few words, and as hard as a plow.

Now Hanna stood there in front of him, washed-out and insignificant, begging a favor. When she met his cold, clear glance, she forgot everything she had been meaning to say and came so close to tears that she had to force herself to be angry in order to keep them back. Going a few steps closer, she looked straight up into his shortsighted eyes. She made as if to cry out loud, but in her need, only managed to produce a hoarse whisper:

"Please, Elof, let me hire Simon for the hill pasture. You have to let him go home with me now—right now because I need him. D'you hear what I say, I need him . . ."

A mild flash of sympathy passed through the farmer, blinding his normal vision and, for a moment or two, it seemed as important to him as to Hanna that Simon should go with her.

"Aye," he replied, "surely."

But Hanna was still in a frenzy, trying to keep back her tears at the refusal she thought he was bound to give, and she did not hear his "aye" but went on begging and bothering him.

"I must take Simon back with me. She's devouring me, I tell you—what I mean is, you must help me, please, by letting me have the boy, because what I mean is . . ."

Simon, who had heard the farmer agree, now came forward and joined in:

"Are we to go right away?"

Hanna had tripped on a staircase which had fewer steps than she had anticipated, and it now dawned on her that she

need not say another word about her distress, because she and Elof were on equal terms. This made her as bashful as if they had touched each other.

"Oughtn't we to speak to Aunt Ida first?" Simon asked.

"No," said Hanna quickly.

"You're not feeling poorly, are you?" Elof wondered. Her face was ashen.

"Yes," she stuttered, "no, I mean, no—it's just that I want you to be good enough and let me hire . . ."

Now she realized it would be better to stop, or she might lose what she had gained. Pushing her kerchief forward on her head—having already, perhaps, revealed too much of herself—she turned round and began walking home, feeling that she now, at long last, could allow herself the relief of a cry. But she must thank Elof, if only to obliterate that naked moment of mutual understanding, and reduce the whole matter to the level of an ordinary loan between independent neighbors. Such as, for instance, "You couldn't by any chance be lending me a bridle? The heifer's gone kind of crazy, and I'll have to tie her to the fence."—"Sure, that's something I can do all right, there's a bridle hanging just beside the barn door."—"My, isn't that a fine thing; I'll thank you greatly."

Hanna turned back, but she did not have the courage to meet Elof's eyes. She snapped a thank-you-very-much, and his answer rumbled after her like a Sunday-morning prayer.

As she walked away, it struck her that as soon as she had gone Elof would probably regret what he had said, and not allow Simon to come. But that can't be helped, I haven't the strength to ask again, I can't even stay to see what happens, she thought.

Elof said he would tell the others that Simon had been hired.

The boy was only to go and fetch a shirt and jacket, and then follow Hanna.

“Do it right now,” he added.

If the lad doesn't go straight away, he never will, Elof thought to himself. Elof was getting angry and he felt that Simon had better go without delay. Now he was beginning to dread having to explain to Ida how he had found himself experiencing a moment of understanding to which he must remain loyal. Most people would regard this as being taken unaware, but then everyone knew that he was not the sort of man who ever was. He would never be able to explain that flash which had made him feel identical with Hanna; but still less could he deny it, or lay the blame on something else. Ida might start asking him questions and they might both begin wondering who he really was, deep down, and a farmer ought not to occupy himself with such things. Heavens above, wasn't he, Elof, the man who was to dig up an acre of ground for the fall, as soon as he had gotten the crops safely indoors?

BY HAYMAKING TIME the snowcap on Gnome Mountain had melted; the peak was quite bare, and the slopes below green with trees.

The Gnome Mountain bog had once been a lake. It had been drained out by people who had lived there long before Egron Stahl's grandfather arrived to stake out a property for himself at the beginning of the nineteenth century. People wondered what had become of this first settlement. Had Charles XII taken all the men for his wars and not returned a single one? Or had the early settlers been lured to their doom by the Little People?

Whatever the answer, Stahl's grandfather had discovered the remains of houses and tools there, as well as the skeleton of a woman and child, lying side by side. His wife, Kajsa, had said that it was unnecessary to look for any more human bones; the skeletons he had found were sufficient evidence that the Little People had been at work.

The Little People are just like humans, only smaller. Their trouble is that they have no souls. When they sense the smell of people, they go crazy and will stop at nothing to get hold of that immortal object. "They covet the human soul above everything else," Kajsa, the Lapp, used to say, when she explained to her children and grandchildren how a group of settlers could be destroyed. The Little People always began by speaking about gold, she claimed.

"Come to us—the whole mountain is full of gold," they would say.

"What use have we for gold?" the settlers retorted.

"Surely there are many things you'd like to buy in the markets down south?"

"We live by barter. The forests are full of white grouse and lynx."

"But gold is so lovely to look at. It glitters . . ."

"Can you grow corn inside the mountain?"

The Little People had lost the first round but they soon came back with fresh temptations.

The settlers still answered them boastfully:

"We'll be under the ground ourselves soon enough. Our business now is to see how much we can get out of the ground while we're still above it."

But the Little People grew bolder and bolder. They began to turn up everywhere, at all times of day, teasing and bickering. A ditch-digger only had to pick up his spade for one of the tiny creatures to be sitting on the handle, mocking him: "What's the use of that?"

Two women might go down to the river to wash clothes and, instantly, two troll women would be there ahead of them, exclaiming in their shrill voices: "Haven't you just finished your washing? What's the use of starting again? The clothes will soon be as dirty as ever."

And although the settlers at first had plenty of excuses with which to defend themselves, they gradually tired of repeating them. The Little People, on the other hand, never left off, but kept on until they had succeeded in crowding out the settlers' own words and thoughts.

"Only the Lord can understand the persistence of the Little People in their greed for souls," Kajsa would say.

A husband, sitting down to his dinner, would be on the

point of remarking to his wife: "This smells good, woman," when a troll would pop up beside his bowl, piping:

"This smells good, woman."

The man was silenced and both taste and smell suddenly went out of the food.

The Little People turned life into an empty husk for the settlers by forestalling their every action, so that nothing had any novelty. People ran, fought and raged in their efforts to overtake and pass the trolls, but they were always just ahead, and thus able to steal the fragrance of the moment.

Husband and wife would sit in silence, listening to the trolls endlessly repeating the same things. Gradually, they began to realize how unnecessary words were and to feel disgust at the urges of the body. They asked themselves what the point of it all was, and wondered how long they would have to continue imitating trolls. Now that their victory was certain, the Little People retired into the mountain to bide their time.

"For the soul has no value unless it surrenders of its own free will," Kajsa, the Lapp, explained.

Nobody imitated the settlers any more; the hours were free and undisturbed, but so gapingly empty that the settlers themselves could not fill them. The flame had died. No job seemed worth doing, and husbands and wives were indifferent to each other.

"Why doesn't your skin glow any longer?"

"There is frost on your eyes."

"The Little People have stolen all our joy."

"They are using it for their gold."

"Let us go into the mountain and steal it back."

"We want our everyday joy back."

And so they went into the mountain after all. The only exception was a woman with a child at her breast. She had neither heard nor seen the Little People.

HANNA had left the memory of that shameful morning behind her in the village. Having shed her widow's gratitude and the anxiety of the lone mother, she now reveled in the peace of the haymaking at Gnome Mountain.

She cut hay from morning to night, and nobody nagged her. Though Linda and Simon played about somewhere behind her, she did not listen to them, letting their laughter merge with the swish of the falling grass, the rustling of her own movements, and the drone of the dragonflies. Nobody bothered about her being a widow who had never deserved to be married and have a child; nobody demanded anything of her; she simply cut grass because it amused her and the grass made no complaint.

The dragonfly, resting a moment in its mad flight, circled over her head. She looked at it as she stopped to sharpen the scythe. It was so eager and obedient, the dragonfly, reflecting the burning heavens with its colorless wings.

"Well, dragonfly, life is like that," she sometimes murmured.

"Those children, oh, those children," she thought.

They raked and stacked the hay, for Hanna was doubtful about allowing Simon to use the scythe—her errand to Elof that morning had certainly not been to obtain cheap labor for the haymaking.

"You can cut when there's nothing more to be raked," she told him.

Every morning she got up and started scything two hours earlier than the children, and they usually did not catch up with her before evening. Simon tried to overtake Hanna, and Linda tried to overtake Simon, and plenty of hay was gathered, as a game, those summer days. The grass on the marshes was soft and delicious to carry, and it was a real adventure to walk in wooden shoes on the heaving, squelching ground.

Linda took care to encourage an atmosphere of haymaking revelry, for she wanted at all costs to keep them invulnerable to the special atmosphere of the mountain pastures. The smell that was wafted up to them from the bogs and which enjoined silence, was heavy and sweet and treacherous and one simply had to stand up to it. If one succumbed, it would not be long before one could both hear and understand the language of Gnome Mountain.

Linda talked as if she still had the odors of the village in her nose. At mealtimes, she would shout "feeding time!" although there were no other haymakers within earshot, and she even began mimicking the villagers.

"D'you suppose there'll be a calf in the barn tonight, Ida?" she would say at supper, putting on Elof's gloomy expression. In her amusement, Hanna quite forgot her respect for her neighbors.

"Will ye maybe give the hoss a pail o' water before ye go to bed, lad?" Linda went on, toying with an imaginary snuff-box, her elbows planted on her knees.

Simon laughed, too, in surprise. Think of Linda daring to treat the master of the farm in such a light-hearted manner, making him seem so small and girlish, and yet so true to himself. He began to blush, yet continued laughing. He did not mind watering the horses at Old Farm, but it was fun to

sit there beside Linda and know that there was no need to go out and do it just then.

Mimicry became a mania with Linda, and she could no longer say anything naturally; everything was colored by the expressions and gestures of the villagers. She even tried to make Simon join in, but he was not equal to it. If, for instance, she remarked, in Hedda's drawling voice: "I guess a bear will carry off one of our mother sheep *this summer*," Simon would say, in alarm:

"D'you really think so?"

And she would have to give the real answer, in Ahl's voice:

"Shut up, old crone. Don't prattle as if you wanted to get rid of the best animal we have."

Simon soon did not know how to express his admiration.

"Just imagine that. Can you really hear what Hedda and Ahl are saying, as far up as this?"

Linda was furious.

"So that's what you believe, is it? You swallow every bit of gossip the Elof brats and all those others run around saying about me, simply because they want to get you away from me. They never let me have anything. All they do is tell lies about me. As if I was able to hear things! Why, I hear even less than other people. Tell that to those dumb calves for me, and give each of them a bucketful of gossip with cold porridge on top!"

Linda seized an armful of hay and ran toward a hayrick. After a long silence, she burst out again, with tears in her eyes:

"You're just like the rest of them. You all believe I can *hear* things when I'm only *pretending*. If I'd known that, you wouldn't have been allowed to come up with me to Gnome Mountain."

Simon began circling round her as she raked and swept, though she obstinately turned her back on him, and he did

not give in until she looked at him. For once, he was as stubborn as she.

"I love you," he said faintly.

Linda became shy but continued to pretend that she felt insulted.

"Where have you heard that word?"

"I haven't *heard* it, I made it up. Because it's true." He stood before her, shaking like a calf.

"Shshsh! Of course you've heard it—at prayers. Don't you remember? 'Then His master said unto Peter, Simon Peter, lovest thou me?' It's from the Bible . . ."

Linda tried to laugh, and imitate Ant Viktor, but did it so clumsily that she failed to make Simon look ridiculous.

Linda was subdued for a few days. She looked at Simon with greater care than before, almost as though he were of some importance, and she waited on him when she had a chance.

Hanna, who had been having a rest from her maternal worries, thought she had found an assistant teacher in Simon.

One of the troubles with Linda was that she could not milk a cow and even refused to sit on a milking stool, although she was already twelve years old. Yet there were children in the village who learned to milk when they were only five! ("Leile had only just given up the breast when she sat down to tackle the udder. The knowledge in her lips went straight into her hands.")

Hanna asked Simon if he would like to try milking, and he taught Linda and himself at the same time. Hanna smiled contentedly at the thought of the cunning way in which she had snatched her daughter from the clutches of indolence and ignorance.

Then she went a step further.

"Wouldn't you say Linda's hair looks better in braids?" she asked her ally one day.

He remained silent, but looked at her questioningly.

"If you think about it, you'll realize that it isn't a good thing for a girl to go about out of doors with her hair down. It doesn't matter combing it out in the house, now and then. But out of doors—it simply isn't a good thing."

Hanna looked beseechingly at him.

"After all, it isn't pretty, not pretty at all. Remember that anyone can see her whole head of hair when a girl runs about outside with it flying loose."

"But there's no one except us to see it up here," Simon replied.

Hanna's look made him feel doubtful as to how many of them there actually were on Gnome Mountain.

From then on, he began to keep an eye on Linda's hair. In the evening he would braid it himself, caressing it so tenderly with the comb and with his hands that Hanna reflected to herself that this wasn't exactly how she had meant him to take it. But now Linda always wore braids when she went out.

They were all tired at night, but in a simple way, without strain.

Only on Sunday did Hanna start worrying again. They ought really to go to the village and celebrate the Sabbath like other people, and she also needed to fetch fresh supplies. They ought to go to prayers.

Every villager who could walk at all went to prayers. Elof went, too. The children needed to hear the Word of God. Linda was sitting by the window in the morning sun being combed by Simon, and her hair shone. The two of them certainly needed to hear the Word of God. But not at prayers, not in full view of the villagers, she decided. Elof and Ida, who were Simon's foster-parents, would also be there. Suddenly, as if she did not know what the Sabbath meant, she exclaimed:

"I'd thought of going down to the village, to see after the house and fetch some bread and potatoes."

She paused, and waited for Linda to say something about going along to prayers. But the girl was drowsing.

"Fetch some turnips for Simon and me," was all she said.

"All right. Well, I'd better be off, then." Hanna lingered, uncertain.

The child's not properly awake yet, she thought. She doesn't realize where I'm going. If I ask her to read the lesson and sing a hymn with Simon, it will make her remember that it's Sunday, and that there are prayers down in the village, and all the other girls are dressed up.

"There was something else I wanted to say before I go . . ."

"Mind nobody sees you when you pull the potatoes and turnips," Linda remarked.

The little monkey—she knows well enough it's Sunday, Hanna thought, having herself already worked out that she would have to take her chance while the others were at the prayer meeting, which would be held at one of the eastern farms this Sunday. She would have to dig about fifteen pounds of potatoes and snatch what she needed during the service and then creep away from her farm before the Elofs got home and saw her.

"Maybe Simon and me will go up the mountain and pick bilberries," Linda called out.

"There was something else I meant to say before going. . . ." Hanna murmured, turning to walk toward the village.

LINDA picked up a basket to put berries in, and set off with Simon for the woods. The twinflower straggled, pink and delicate, in the midst of the moss, pine needles and brushwood along the path.

"If Mother could see us now, I expect she'd say 'Oh, those children,' " Linda mused.

They flushed and their hands perspired, and both were thinking: We're in love; we aren't children any more. Linda was dreamy, and made no attempt to mimic the villagers. They went on climbing upward, and though the ground was blue with berries, they did not pick any, feeling that the earth, with its extravagance, was trying to tempt them to indulge in childish behavior which they had outgrown.

As they toiled upward, the trees grew increasingly stunted, and they would soon be in the region of the dwarf birch.

"What's frightening about this silly old Gnome Mountain? Let's go round it and have a look at the northwest side, and see if we can spot any villages from there."

We might dig up some birch roots and make a sewing basket for Aunt Hanna," Simon suggested.

"I suppose we could, if we wanted to," was Linda's reply.

They were now above the tree line, and the air was light and exhilarating.

"Ant Viktor is reading the prayers now, at home," Linda

said. "Do you think it's dull walking up here instead of listening to him?"

"No. I never think anything's dull," said Simon.

"I wish I was like you. I wish we were a single . . . a single person. A person like you."

A bead of sweat fell from their linked hands.

They continued until they found themselves in front of a seemingly bottomless gorge, which stretched away beyond sight. Simon freed his hand and, placing himself in front of Linda, held out his arms to prevent her from looking down. But she had done so already, and was feeling giddy.

Standing there behind his back, a sudden impulse came over her to push him. The temptation was insistent, and lasted many seconds. Then it passed and she began to cry.

"Why are you crying?" asked Simon in amazement.

"Come over here. Don't stand so close," Linda shrieked.

"But I never get dizzy. I don't feel bad, looking down." Still she continued weeping, and he asked again:

"What's making you cry?"

"I wanted to push you over the edge," she screamed.

Simon smiled, showing his big white teeth.

"What for?"

"For nothing. Just like that."

"Oh, well, I might have caught hold of something."

"That's just it," Linda hiccuped. "That's just what's so awful. You'd never have got up. Look how deep it is." She stamped her feet and wept.

"Yes, but you didn't do it," Simon said consolingly.

"But nearly, nearly . . . I only just didn't!"

Simon looked down the gorge and discovered a new reason for excusing her.

"Look, Linda. See that small birch growing on one side. I'd

have grabbed hold of that and climbed up again quite easily, and it wouldn't have mattered at all. I'd just have burst out laughing."

"But supposing you hadn't had time," she whimpered.

"I'm pretty agile," he said, smiling apologetically.

They continued along the side of the gully, Simon walking nearest the edge.

"We'll have to get married, you and me," said Linda. "We must, as soon as we're the right age."

"Surely." His face was almost split in two by his broad smile.

But Linda was decidedly not in good spirits.

"Now I know exactly what you are like, you see. You must never go about with anybody else in dangerous places. An ordinary girl wouldn't understand how much care one has to take of you. Someone else might give in to temptation and push you over. Nobody else really knows what you're like. And because of that, I'm responsible for you."

"Surely," Simon repeated.

"Maybe you think only grownups know what responsibility means. But I'm more grown-up than anybody thinks. In one way."

Cackling hoarsely, a flock of blackbirds suddenly flew up from the undergrowth and a sickly stench which irritated their nostrils made the children realize that there must be carrion nearby. A few steps further on they saw two gleaming white shin bones sticking straight up out of the gorge.

They went closer, gazing with horror at the bones and speaking in whispers.

"It must be an elk. How terrible to have fallen head first like that, on his antlers. Maybe he roared?"

"No, elks are silent when they're wounded. Elof said so."

They stood looking down at the carcass, from which flies and stench came belching forth. It was not yet quite bare, but the hind legs had been eaten clean, and the hooves shone as if they were illuminated by the moon.

"What's the worst thing that could happen to you?" Simon asked suddenly. Now he was experiencing a horror of his own and was no longer simply somebody who was ready to agree.

"Mmmm—there's a lot of things I can't really stand. What about you?"

"It's if anyone was to take down my trousers and give me a beating," he whispered.

"Have you ever been beaten that way?"

"No, but I once saw when somebody was. Before I came to Old Farm."

"Did it seem so awful, then?"

"I thought I'd die—with the shame of it."

"What about the one who was beaten—what did he do?"

"He screamed and swore, the whole time."

"So would I have done," said Linda. "But the farmer who beat him, what happened to him?"

"Nothing . . . why?"

A huge rat scuttled out of the elk's carcass and seated itself on the bare tail-bone. Its girth made it clumsy and its fur and eyes glistened. It looked up at the children, baring small, sharp teeth.

Linda shuddered, and dragged Simon away with her, saying that they must go back to the safe side of the mountain and have a wash in the river there.

"That'll make you forget the elk," she said.

The boy turned several times to look back at the stiff legs.

"He might at least have been allowed to die with his head up," he muttered.

When Hanna returned from the village, Linda and Simon were sitting on the steps of the hut. She was tired after the walk, tired also by her fears, and on the way back she had thought with pleasure of hearing the children's chatter again and of listening to Linda belittling the villagers and making them seem harmless to her with her mimicry. But Linda imitated no one and did not seem to be her usual self. Both the children were as silent and solemn as if they were attending a prayer meeting.

I go off in the morning and come back before dark, yet it's as though several years had passed on the mountain. And "those children" are grown-up and, somehow, like strangers, Hanna thought.

Not until she pulled out the turnips did a ripple of childish greed pass through them. Simon cut a turnip in half, giving Hanna and Linda a piece each. Then he cut up another. Linda put her piece beside her mother's, saying to Simon:

"It's half of yours I want."

They sat there hollowing out the turnips with knives, eating the loose pulp and drinking the juice which gathered in the hollows.

Meanwhile darkness fell upon the mountain and the bare pinnacle grew red. Mist floated in across the marshes.

The rain bird's quavering was heard and the cotton grass shivered on its stalks. The rain bird gave the lie to all earthly comfort.

"Listen to me, and you will hear how the dead mourn," she cried.

How seductive her sorrow was, how tempting to let her call the tune.

"We'll likely have rain before evening." Hanna and Linda said the few short words at the same time, the formula which people used to silence the call of the Unknown.

THE mountain hut, though small, was divided into a front room and kitchen.

Hanna and Linda each had a bunk in the kitchen while Simon slept in the front room, which Stahl had used in the days when he came up to Gnome Mountain to retire from the world.

It was August and the evenings were growing darker; an old owl screeched on the top of the cow barn and the safest thing for human beings to do was to sleep.

One night Linda woke up and tiptoed into Simon's room.

"I dreamed that you called me," she whispered.

"I didn't, it was the elk," Simon replied. He, too, was only half awake and fretting.

"I dreamed that I'd pushed you down and I had to come in to make sure you were still here."

She slid underneath his coverlet, and as in a dream they murmured about the awful things they had dreamed, and went to sleep in the middle of a sentence with their arms round each other.

In the morning Hanna saw that Linda's place was empty and, opening the bedroom door, found the two of them in Simon's bed. In sleep they were "those children" again. Linda lay curled up, with her back to Simon and her knees drawn up, and both hands piously folded under her cheek. Simon curved behind her, his face resting against the top of her head

and one arm round her waist. The sight of such tenderness made Hanna tremble.

A crack opened in the crust of her obedience, and jealousy—an evil juice—began to trickle out.

Oh, to seize Simon by the hair, lift him out of bed and throw him away like a tuft of weed, and then to lie down beside Linda herself, forget the whole world and fall asleep, again and again, as she and Linda had once slept, in the far-off days of their Paradise.

How had it come about that she had grown rough and twisted as a stunted fir tree, while her child was still soft. She wanted to scream, "This is my child, I want my child back, I want my breasts back and the games we used to play, I want myself and my child back."

Coming out of the cottage, she noticed through her tears that the birches already had yellow specks, for the summer had been dry, and she remembered being told, as a child, to sing at the first sign of autumn, "Teach me, O woods, to fade serenely." But now Hanna stamped her feet like a child or a godless woman, and stormed at the birch trees:

"I won't—I won't fade serenely—do you hear me?"

Simon was often tired when he woke but seldom downhearted, for he could never imagine that the new day would bring him anything but good. But this particular morning was quite unlike any other, and he had to laugh while he wondered how everything had happened and how he ought to behave when Linda woke up.

Before he came to Old Farm he had been accustomed to sharing a bed with one or two younger children, but there he was allowed to sleep alone. Ulrika, Eva and Maria took turns sleeping together, so that none of them had to sleep single all the time. Simon had once asked Ida to let him take

turns with them, so that each of them would have a bedfellow every night. But she had answered that this wasn't done. She did not know that in other places where he had been—where, indeed, in all other respects, he had been treated as an outsider—the children had begged to be allowed to sleep with him because he always tucked in the bedclothes so well and never kicked away anyone who had cold feet, rubbing them with his own instead, which kept them warm until morning. Of course it hadn't been possible to say that to Aunt Ida, and he had been forced to go off to his lonely bed and be a good bedfellow to no purpose. And now he was grown-up and unused to it.

But when Linda awoke, she made everything easy. Stretching herself a little, she murmured and smiled without opening her eyes.

"My little Momsie," she said, rubbing her head against his chest.

"What's that you're saying?"

"You're a real Mummy."

"Surely I'm not," he giggled. "If it comes to that, I'm more of a Dad."

"No, you're a little Mum, a little morning Mum, a Mum, a Momsie-mum."

She opened one eye and they both bubbled over with laughter. Then Linda shut it again, and rattled off some more nonsense talk. When she awoke properly at last, she exclaimed:

"Imagine . . . Every morning, for as long as I can remember, I've wanted to cry. But, today, nothing seems to be missing."

Linda now stopped mimicking the villagers, but she still spent her time inventing other amusing tricks. They were

thought up for Simon's benefit, but Hanna, who no longer heard the swish of the cut grass or the drone of the dragonfly, listened eagerly to her voice.

(A single laugh may shut you out so completely that you wonder if you have the right to go on living.)

"If you want the scythe for a bit, you can take it," Hanna told Simon, adding, "Then Linda and I can make a hayrick together." But Linda did not help her to collect the wood for the rick or carry any hay to it; she stayed close behind Simon, raking together small heaps which Hanna had to fetch herself.

Hanna was always trying to send the boy off on various errands, such as fetching water, driving the cows home, or collecting firewood from the forest. But Linda would always break in:

"Come on, Simon, we'll do it together." Then she would put her hand on his shoulder and accompany him.

At first Linda did not give much thought to her desire to be near him. But when it suddenly dawned on her that her mother was jealous, a wish for revenge surged up in her and she began to calculate her care.

At times she would talk as if they were a young married couple, and Hanna the old mother-in-law about to be ousted.

"I think you ought to change your shirt tomorrow, Simon," she said.

The boy flushed and looked shamefacedly at Hanna.

"Isn't that for Aunt Hanna to say?"

"Why, yes, if you like. I only thought of saving her trouble by washing your shirt at the same time as my blouse."

Linda went into Simon's room in the evenings while her mother was still awake, and also spoke to him in their babyish night-language in the daytime, trying in every way to create a giggly "you-know-what" atmosphere between them both.

She would call out "Mamma, Mamma," and when Hanna whispered a trembling "yes," turn her back and declare, "I meant Simon."

Yet Hanna could scarcely say to her, "I'm the one who gave you birth."

The boy found it difficult to cope with this conflict, but Linda trapped him with her tyrannical servility and lured his attention to such an extent that he did not have time to take the edge off her malice. When they were alone and he started reproaching her, she replied:

"What ideas you get! Why, we're only children. Before you came, Mother always used to say, 'Just think if you'd only had a brother or a sister, Linda, so there would have been someone for you to play with.' If she's going to begin grudging me now, when at long last I have one—well, then I really don't know what to do with her."

Linda was able to defend her childishness in grown-up terms, and she could skip into the age which happened to suit her purpose of the moment, while Simon foolishly remained in his real one. His feelings were too blunt to be expressed by puns, and he was as clumsy at parrying Linda's trick of playing her mother against him as he had earlier been adroit in interpreting Hanna's wishes.

He spent an entire day thinking he would talk Linda around in the evening. And when Linda was lying at his side, he said:

"Aunt Hanna looked awful sorrowful this evening."

"Sure, but then she's a widow," Linda replied.

"Do you believe that's what she's thinking about?"

"What else could it be? Wouldn't you be sad if I were to die?"

"Yes, of course." But Simon felt unhappy even though Linda was very much alive.

"You ought to be kind, Linda," he managed to say, but his voice cracked, turning into a shrill squeak which he could not control. It sounded silly, and made him feel even more like weeping.

"Am I not kind?" Linda asked softly, and her hand seemed to him like the wing of an angel as it brushed across his skin. She touched his secret parts, which she had earlier avoided, and he sobbed, "Oh, please stay there." And Linda was more lovable than ever before, and a happiness undreamed of surged through him, sweeping away the thought of Hanna, and the tension in his throat. He lay paralyzed, yet felt as if he were flying, and his childhood seemed as distant as a wisp of hay on the ground far below. Something utterly new beckoned—yet in spite of the blissful dizziness of the journey, he sensed that this new thing would be difficult to bear. He was unable to lift a finger or say a single word, and tears ran in hot streams down his cheeks.

The climate of the village was harsh, and its spirit allowed little play for feelings of gentleness. The women, in their constant contact with wool, dough, udders and infants, were more apt to be spoiled with gentleness than the men, but for the villagers in general life offered so much rough going that they found it safest not to yield to softness of any kind—it made for unhappiness. Newly woven underclothing might be as prickly as chaff against their skin, but a lumberman who had grown used to such garments would profit when the snow showered down from the trees, penetrating every opening—"My skin is used to being chafed, so you just go on falling, damned snow." Neither Linda nor Simon had the right to the soft living accorded to infants and newlyweds, being both

of an age when the skin and all five senses of a human being ought to be chafed and hardened for grown-up village life. Yet, during the lazy days of late summer, they deluded themselves with the wild belief that the laws of the village did not apply to them.

When the winter arrived they became unhappy.

The Elofs received their foster son back as though they had done him an injustice; all must now be forgotten, and he must remain at home. He had grown during the weeks up in the mountain, and there were new thoughts in his head. The girls teased him when his voice broke, but the grownups pretended not to notice. Ida made over Elof's old clothes for him and he was allowed to help with all the work on the farm. His daily program was decided without words—orders were not necessary in a well-run home where everyone knew what was waiting to be done.

Hanna, who toiled from morning to night, had no gift for imbuing the air around her with the feeling that work was essential. On the other farms, a masterful housewife could tell a lazy girl, simply by her manner of putting out a saucepan, looking at the butter churn or standing beside the clock, sighing, her hands on her hips. Like every good villager, Hanna knew that work is something essential, but she could not convey her knowledge to Linda.

The early mornings had once again become miserable for Linda. She turned away from the coffee which Hanna brought to her bedside, and only wanted to go back to sleep.

School life was over for her, as she had been considered so good in all subjects that she was permitted to skip the last class.

"I don't want to wake up—I won't go into the barn—I don't want to do anything," she would say. Hanna, who had experienced the famine of '67 when she was the same age as Linda, remonstrated with her:

"But surely you want to live."

Linda sat up swiftly, angry tears spurting from her eyes.

"What should I get up or be good for, when Simon isn't here."

A wave of anger swept through Hanna, anger at the memory of that summer morning by Elof's grindstone.

"This time, my girl, you'll have to go to Old Farm yourself to hire a farm hand."

Linda crept back under the bedclothes and began whimpering more childishly than before:

"Why couldn't he at least be allowed to sleep here at night? I'm frozen. . . ."

"You've got the best sheepskin cover—that ought to be enough."

"But I've no one to play with. . . ."

"Simon'll soon be doing the work of a grown man and you complain that you've no one to play with. . . !"

"I'd be hard-working, too, if I could lie in the same bed as Simon."

With a courage born of jealousy, Hanna retorted:

"Go out and lie with anyone, wherever you like—in a snow-drift if you want. But not in this house."

On such a morning Linda would often be seized by the sudden desire for work and sit down to card wool, with a sulky expression and grown-up gestures, laboring until she forgot to be angry and said something funny by mistake. But whenever she had the chance she would go into the village, to look around and be looked at and to find a place for herself there. She invented small errands, such as borrowing or returning things, and would often stay in a farmhouse until the occupants drove her away with their pointed allusions.

"Who is it that's helping Hanna at home until you're big enough?" a neighbor's wife would say. Her own daughter,

who was Linda's age, had been spinning without a break during the two hours Linda had sat in the house doing nothing.

Yet often Linda was quick to defend herself, in a precocious manner which brooked no arguments:

"Isn't it natural to want to meet neighbors when one's an only child and there's no one at home to talk to?"

Or else: "Anyone who wants to be like everybody else has to meet people."

There she hit the nail on the head. For obviously the simple Hanna was not really suitable as a mother. Motherhood had come too late for her and an orphan is still an orphan, after all. People felt they ought to give a hand in bringing up the child, and not always be dropping malicious hints to the poor mite. And thus it was that the neighbors' wives taught Linda to spin and weave, and also to some extent, to gossip.

Although she was least welcome at Old Farm, it was there that Linda preferred to go in the evening, and she tugged at the links of the family chain in the hope of breaking it. She would offer to help Maria with her homework or give Ulrika a hand in winding a skein of wool or drying the dishes. Ida she would supply with episodes from the life of the neighbors, and soon knew exactly what she most liked to hear, though Ida always pretended she was not interested. Elof was the only person in the family to whom she never dared to speak, because he seemed to look straight through her. She was unwanted in their home, but on account of Simon she simply could not stay away. When the thin, overgrown boy came into the kitchen he was often so confused at the sight of her that he stayed by the door.

Linda gazed at him and thought: I'm the only one who knows what he's like. His features were not delicately made, but one could not call them coarse. There were no hiding

places for secrets in his face; it had no mercy on its owner. The bones of his forehead shone through the skin. Its very transparency made Linda tremble, and her hands were as tender as if she were holding a bird's egg.

On this particular evening, Simon stood awkwardly at the door, all his attention concentrated on looking at Linda and maintaining his broad smile. Until Ida spoke to him he could not even collect himself enough to come forward into the warmth. Crossing the floor, he felt Linda's eyes on his back and began to limp and laugh and blush with embarrassment. The Elof girls giggled and Linda was ashamed that they should poke fun at him. It seemed almost intolerable to her to have to sit there, being stared at by ordinary village people who knew nothing about her and Simon's experience on Gnome Mountain.

But in spite of her humiliation she remained in her seat near the door, looking at Simon.

Finally Ida asked if she did not think her mother might be worrying about her.

"I'm afraid of the dark," Linda replied glibly. "I daren't go home alone."

"I'll take you," Simon broke in, the tip of his nose bright red.

And off they went.

Though both were relieved to get away from inquisitive eyes, they now felt a permanent sense of shame and could hardly speak to each other. On approaching Linda's home they looked to see if there was a light in the barn.

When Hanna was still at work there, they could go into the kitchen and sit down close together, listening for her footsteps. But if it was so late that she had finished her chores they would creep into the barn and climb up into the hayloft.

The smell of hay reminded them of the air at Gnome Mountain, the darkness there veiled their shame, and they could play their gentle games in peace.

Simon acted the part of mother and Linda was his baby. First, he loosened her hair, then they unbuttoned their clothes and Linda lay down on top of him, crooning like a baby, "Mum, mum, mum, mom, mom, mom, mumsie, mumsie, mom." Later he was the baby, but, lying on top of Linda, he grew heavy and hot. Then he guided her hand to his secret parts, whispering instructions to her, and she did as he told her until fluid spurted into her hand and he groaned "Mamma." Linda was touched by his trembling and moaning. It made her feel powerful and good, like a real mother. Afterward he would sink down against her, with his face pressed to her throat. Sometimes he cried. Then she put her arms round him, rocked his shoulders and stroked his neck, speaking to him gently and comfortingly, "There, there now, little one, you're with your Mamma, don't be sad." She delighted in the feel of his weight and the touch of his skin against hers.

"I'll weave you a silk shirt," she promised.

"You're the softest thing in the world," he said.

"Next summer we'll go to Gnome Mountain again . . ."

"If only Elof lets me, now that I'm so big . . ."

"I'll throw myself down the gorge, if you don't come with me . . ."

Then he began crying again. The awful thought of losing her mingled with the memory of the elk standing on its head at the bottom of the gorge. And supposing Elof did not allow him to go to Gnome Mountain next summer, what then? He loved Linda so much, Linda, his only mother in the world, who had promised to weave him a silk shirt.

But what had he to give her? He felt he would never be innocent again in his life.

But as long as they lay side by side their sorrows were mild and they even hurt each other a little, just for the joy of comforting each other. When at last they had to leave the barn, they invented some errand in case they were asked questions. They went to the woodpile and each took up an armful for Hanna.

Hanna sat by the fire, chatting to Ulrika, or was it Maria, who had come over to fetch Simon. She talked and talked, to prevent the girl from explaining her errand and from giving loose rein to her thoughts.

Finally, however, the neighbor's daughter managed to interrupt:

"Mother wants you to come home, Simon, so we can go to bed and lock the door."

And there was nothing else for him to do but to deposit his armful of wood and go off—in the opposite direction, and with another girl.

Hanna made one of her lame efforts to be a woman of the village, saying sternly to Linda, "Why have you been away so long?"

"I learned to weave four-shaft today."

"I could have taught you that."

"But you haven't set up the loom yet . . ."

"No, I haven't. No village child comes and helps me when you're away."

Linda stood with her nose flattened against the window pane, gazing after Simon. From under her bonnet, her fair hair escaped down her back.

"Do you mean to say you've been at the neighbors' with your hair all untidy like that?"

"The braids must have loosened somehow. But it will soon be time to go to bed anyway."

Hanna noticed a wisp of hay on the girl's cardigan and exclaimed:

"Go to bed, did you say? It looks to me as if you'd been already. Where were you with that boy?"

"Nowhere! He walked home with me because I'm so afraid of the dark, and we went to the barn to see if there were any turnips for us to eat."

"You should know that turnips aren't fit for folks to eat at this time of year!"

"Sure. It's dreadful being folk at this time of year."

"What were you up to in the hayloft? I'd like to know. You don't go to the barn to tend to the beasts," her mother continued.

"Oh, we were just walking through, and Simon gave me a push so I fell down in the hay. It was only a joke. What's that to make such a fuss about?"

"Do you think it was just a joke for Simon, too?"

Linda did not reply. She was thinking that Ulrika and Simon would now have gotten to Old Farm. They would be opening the front door and by now they'd be inside—and maybe Elof would be waiting there with his boots off. How awful it would be if he were to look at Simon with those sharp eyes of his. Simon burst into tears so easily, especially when they had been playing Mamma-mamma-baby. Just imagine what would happen if they began asking him why he was so pale. She thought to herself, "I love Simon" and, once again, felt her hands trembling as if she were holding a bird's egg. Then she said, solemnly:

"I'm unhappy."

Hanna cringed, as she had so often done for Stahl, before Linda was born. There her daughter was standing, saying that she was unhappy as though she had the special gifts which

a human being must possess, in order to be able to mouth such a big word.

Why should she, Hanna, who was so insignificant, always get involved with gifted people who had power over words?

There was a long silence, and then Hanna said hoarsely:

"You'd better have something to eat. Shall I warm up the porridge—it's got cold, standing there . . ."

"I'm not hungry," Linda replied, at last turning away from the window.

Hanna crept a tiny bit closer to the fire, and asked her daughter if there was anything she could do for her.

Sensing her mother's good intentions, and realizing that they might be put to some use, Linda ventured a question.

"Mum—if there's something else I want, would you give it to me?"

The girl's eyes were soft, and offered reconciliation.

"If it is in my power . . ."

"You've got a white silk kerchief . . ." Hanna had to think for a moment—did she own a white head shawl or not? Linda went through her mother's wardrobe more often than she did herself.

They carried the chest in from the porch, pulled out Hanna's black church dress and two or three skirts and blouses which she never used. Underneath lay the yellowed silk shawl, with its long fringe.

Linda emerged from her great unhappiness and began skipping about with the kerchief against her face, pleading like a child:

"Mamma, you will let me have it, won't you? You never wear it yourself—*please* give it to me. I'll be as good as gold and do everything you say—if I can only have it . . ."

"Well . . . I'd thought of giving it to you for your confirma-

tion next year, but if you really want it that badly . . .” Without noticing that Linda was not listening, Hanna began telling the story of how it had been given to her by Stahl, as an engagement present. They had first met at a service on St. Michael’s Day and he had offered her some candy. The following New Year he had presented her with the kerchief, and a few days after Twelfth Night, his proposal had arrived. When they were married, on the next St. Michael’s Day, he had given her a hymn book with a clasp which Hanna had also planned that Linda should get when she was confirmed.

Linda, however, had no ears for this meager account of her origins. She was completely taken up with the kerchief as she sat by the stove, holding it on her knee, caressing and folding it, combing out the fringe and whispering:

“Mum, my little momsie-mum . . .”

IDA said she hardly knew what to think about her foster son these days—though she otherwise found it easy to speak her mind on the most complicated matters. Simon had sudden bursts of activity when he was clever and practical, but seemed to lose his grip entirely in between times. They would be carting hay, for instance—with Elof standing in the barn, gathering huge pitchforkfuls and throwing them up to the boy on the wagon, for him to spread and stamp on, so that the hay would be evenly packed. Now and again, however, Simon would grab hold of an armful of hay, press it to him and begin talking nonsense as if it were not hay at all. Elof would have to shout his name several times before he came to and answered. The farmer saw that something was wrong and that words were needed to reprimand him. He would suggest, for instance, that Simon ought to meet home other boy of the same age, and strengthen his muscles by wrestling with him. Then Simon would reply, with a button-nosed smile, “Am I weak for my years?”

That was not the point, of course. But words were not Elof’s best tools; he simply could not hit the mark with them. Ida was the right person, he thought, to speak to Simon about the best way for a fourteen-year-old to spend his brief leisure hours.

But Ida was, at this moment, experiencing an increasing

delight in her daughters, treating them almost as younger sisters, allowing them to do as they pleased and encouraging them to give precocious answers. Both Elof and Simon felt clumsy in that feminine world, with its mysterious double meanings. And they were four to one in any battle of words with Simon.

"Now the cat's run away again," Maria would begin innocently.

"He's probably over at the nearest farm—everything lands at West Stahls' these days," Ulrika would continue.

Eva might then suggest that it was there that it had gotten its torn ear.

"Yes, I daresay—the neighbor's cat has sharp claws, even if they're well concealed," Ida would wind up slyly.

Her bright little daughters looked so healthy when they giggled. And not only the furrow on Simon's nose, but his whole face turned white, though he smiled and pretended to believe they were referring to real cats.

Everything that used to be so touching about Simon when he was smaller, trotting about the farm like a little gnome, had disappeared, now that he had grown so clumsy and large. He smelled of cold sweat and puberty. And that voice of his . . .

Once or twice, Ida had found him in tears, and had not known quite what to do. When Ulrika had started having her small attacks once a month, she would take her aside into the bedroom, talk to her confidentially about "us women," and explain what it was all about. But what could one say to a moist, raw-boned human calf like Simon? His eyes told her that he was still a child but as soon as she felt like putting a comforting arm round his shoulders, a cloud of indefinable odors would rise up from him, making her long for her dainty, fresh daughters. The years of puberty could almost be regarded as a form of illness, she concluded, deciding that

probably the best thing was to leave the boy alone as much as possible, and simply hope that he would one day recover by himself and turn into a full-grown man. Unless, of course, there was something abnormal about him. But in his case there was nothing to go by, as nobody knew his parents.

He was, in any case, to be confirmed that year. And this was a good thing, as it would not only separate him temporarily from Linda but also put him under the guidance of a parson. His confirmation was fixed for Easter, and Ulrika's for Midsummer.

Ida and Elof discussed the question of outfits for the children. Ulrika must obviously have a white frock, which Maria and Eva could use when their turn came. But the purchase of a new suit for Simon was not so obvious. Nobody would criticize them if they borrowed one for him. Even legitimate sons usually borrowed a confirmation suit from a neighbor. Simon was, after all, only a foster child. He grew at a great rate, and no one on the farm could take over his old clothes. Everything spoke in favor of borrowing a suit—yet, in the end, they decided that he should have a new one after all. Both Elof and Ida were relieved by each other's acceptance of this solution, for they were anxious about the boy, and had a stunted kind of tenderness for him, which never seemed to find outlet. They hoped the new confirmation clothes would convey it to him.

Simon was pleased, of course, and thanked them at least once a day. But their generosity did not seem to have steadied him in any other way. Elof would have liked to stop his running over to the neighbors' so often, but he hoped Ida would see to the matter. Ida said this was Hanna's business and declared that if Hanna did not look after her own wench then why should she, Ida, keep track of her foster son? After all, Ida had three daughters to keep an eye on and Hanna only one.

SIMON dreaded his confirmation, partly because it meant that he would not meet Linda for a whole month, and partly on account of the Catechism—he found it difficult to learn things by heart.

Linda gave him the silk kerchief to console him. They used it in their gentle games, and she showed him how to fold it about him when he longed for her.

But a week before Simon was due to leave for the Church village, a new anxiety came over them. The ordering of confirmation clothes, not only for Simon but also for Ulrika, had caused a great stir at Old Farm. There was white muslin for her dress, light grey wool for a three-quarter-length coat, and patterns and discussions about straw pleating and puffed sleeves, boots, stockings, petticoats and all sorts of small things which a girl about to be confirmed might wish for. Linda, who was on the periphery of this whirl of vanity, was allowed to stroke some of the garments, to admire and to envy. She and Maria were to be confirmed the following year, and suddenly childhood seemed hatefully long. The last piece of finery with which Ulrika was supplied was a kerchief, with a pattern of roses and green leaves on a white background. This kerchief was just as soft as the one Linda had but infinitely more beautiful. She felt her mouth go dry with desire when she saw it.

During her meetings with Simon she spoke of nothing else. "Lend me Ulrika's kerchief."

"But it isn't mine—you can have the white one back."

"I don't care for that white one. It's the roses. I want to see how they're made."

"Why don't you ask Ulrika? She'll probably lend it to you . . ."

"Ulrika, that mean pig! Why, she treats me like a little girl, just because I'm a year younger. She's forgotten that we finished school in the same class. It's just so unfair that I'm not allowed to be confirmed too, this year. . . . You should have seen her today, showing off in the middle of the floor and putting her head on one side, like some kind of young lady. And the kerchief was on her head one minute and round her neck the other. And her sisters and I weren't allowed as much as to touch it . . ."

"Oh, if I only had the money, I'd buy you . . ."

"Look, Simon, it isn't what you think at all. I don't want to own that kerchief, I only want to borrow it—see? I won't dirty it or tear it; all I want is to see how it's made. I'll copy the roses and make a pattern and then paint it on the bedroom wall. Mum said we'll have to paint the bedroom sometime and that it's all right with her if I want to. She has nothing against it, you see. Surely you don't think anyone who's so pious and careful would say anything she doesn't mean."

"Yes, but if Ulrika doesn't lend it to you, how can you believe that I'll get it, me being a boy."

"But she needn't know anything about it. You take it while she's asleep. She'll never notice; she'll just believe it has been put aside and next morning it'll be back in its place."

"And where's that? I don't know where she keeps it."

"In the top drawer of the chest in the front room."

"Wouldn't it be better if you took back this white kerchief?" Simon ventured.

They were sitting on the south side of the octagonal barn, on the protruding bottom beam, the lowliest beam in the village. They could not be observed from any window, and the only view they had, themselves, was across country—the snow-encrusted plowland and, farther away, a slope of Gnome Mountain. The sun had been dazzling bright all day. Icicles were melting on the eaves and the ground was covered with powdery snow. The walls of the barn were still quite warm, but the air quickly grew chilly after sunset. The sky was immense and violent in its sudden changes, inexorable both in its fury and its beauty.

Linda jumped down from the beam, making as if to leave, and the snow which was coarse and blue and sharp, crunched beneath her feet.

“No, don’t go, Linda, I’ll do anything you like, but don’t go,” Simon whimpered. He wanted to do nothing but cry and felt that this was shameful, thinking to himself that he would never be grown-up in that way, and not really knowing if he wanted to be. The top of Gnome Mountain seemed to him like a tiny blue cap against the sullen red of the surrounding sky, and the air was so strong that the blood surged in his veins when he inhaled it. How frightening life could be on all sides, when it wanted to get at a human insect.

Linda turned around, in a good mood again, and stood there smiling at him, a sturdy, straight-grown girl. She looked so secure—he would not let himself be scared by the smell of melting snow or the evening sky or by any suspicions about that small loan. He would simply stick to Linda’s rosy face and her bright smile—she was the only one who understood. The softness. The rightness. The softness. Oh, that soft hardness. He grew weak, looking at her, and thought about the great secret! And he gave the promise.

Yet it was not until their last evening that he came to her with the borrowed kerchief. He cried and said to her that it was because he dreaded the thought of the confirmation classes. He clung to her, seeking her help but she was carried away in her ecstasy over the kerchief.

"You really are sweet, Simon," she said, caressing the smooth silk.

"You won't forget that I must have the scarf back tomorrow morning before I leave."

They were sitting in the hayloft but on this evening there were no games of mamma-mamma-baby. The silk kerchief was Linda's child and, though it was too dark for her to see it, she prepared herself for the sight of it by tracing the faint elevations on the material with her fingers and divining the roses.

She forgot about her friend and when he reached out for her she was no longer the Linda he knew, the Linda who needed Simon and who stood up for him.

He was alone, and life was threatening him from all sides.

HE DID NOT dare get to sleep, thinking about how he had to be up before all the others at Old Farm in order to get to the West Stahls' for the kerchief and smuggle it back into the drawer in the bedroom before anyone woke up. His thoughts were so concentrated on this one thing that he would not allow himself to go to sleep. But he dropped off, just before dawn.

He dreamed he was in a barn and had fallen into a pit there—he was falling and falling and the hay was stifling hot and he thought he would suffocate. He called for Linda and she answered from high up in the loft—she was beautiful and pink with her flashing white teeth, and her voice was clear.

"Help me up," he said.

"There's no hurry. Don't be scared," Linda chirped and he felt as if he was going to faint.

"Let down a rope for me," he said in his hoarse crow's voice, and was ashamed when he heard how ugly it sounded.

"I don't have a rope," Linda replied. "But I can make one out of Ulrika's kerchief if I cut it up."

"No!" he shrieked, sweating with heat and terror.

"Then throw me your own kerchief and we'll use that."

He felt about in his pocket and found the yellowed shawl. It was soft, as cool and soft as water, and he rested on it for a long time. Then Linda called out again and now she seemed

further up than ever. He saw and heard how she cut up Ulrika's kerchief and he tried to scream but no sound came. She went on cutting and cutting, and then began tying the rose-embroidered strips together. Meanwhile she put out her little tongue, which was rose-colored too, and it seemed quite close to him although she was so far away. In the end she lowered the silken rope, and he began laboriously to climb up. He was quite close to her face and was about to heave himself over the edge when he suddenly lost his footing and plunged downward, the silken rope with all its knots slipping through his hands. He fell, calling "Mamma!" and woke up, sweating and panting, to find Ida standing beside his bed.

He thought how awful it was that anybody should see him at that moment—yet Ida's eyes were gentle and reflective.

She was wondering whom he had been dreaming about when he called out "Mamma." Perhaps, after all, it might not be the best thing to tease a growing boy and to leave it at that. Perhaps she ought to have tried to get so close to him that he could have said "Mamma" to her, instead of just "Aunt Ida." Perhaps what was happening to him might be as delicate as that which had befallen Ulrika. If so, she must have neglected something.

She chatted to him in a friendly way while she was packing his things. In went the firkin of black pudding, the butter tin, the oatmeal bread, fresh cakes, the jar of lingonberries and a bag of flour. He was to give all this to Aunt Tyra, Ant Viktor's sister, who was to accompany the children and keep house for them when they got to the Church village. But the bag of pretzels he might keep for himself, Ida said, adding that he should nibble one if he found the time passing slowly. She told him not to worry too much if he couldn't always answer the parson's questions. Being prepared for confirmation was

not the same as going to school, where the main thing was to know one's lessons. It mattered just as much what kind of a character one had, and on that score, Simon had nothing to fear.

"Because you, Simon, are an unusually good boy. You simply wouldn't be capable of ever doing anything wrong. I've never said this before, but I've thought many times that your only fault is that you're *too* goodhearted. But remember, there's One who sets greater store by that disposition than this wicked world does . . ."

Moved by their significance, Ida flushed over her own words. Who could tell—maybe this was the sort of little speech that the boy would remember when he was an old man:

"The morning I went off to Bible school my foster-mother said to me . . . and all my life I've never forgotten it . . ."

Ida went on collecting the things he was to take with him. But Simon was rigid, washing and dressing himself as if he were imprisoned in a glass dome. He sensed that Ida was doing him small kindnesses, but could not respond. He sat down to drink the coffee she had poured for him, but had not even time to begin drinking it before he heard the girls stirring in the front room. One of them walked across the floor to the chest of drawers—Ulrika, no doubt. Going white to the eyes, Simon rose, looking at Ida with a desperate plea in his expression. She received it with a kind of respect, even with a promise of temporary protection. As he went out, the air shook with shrieks from Ulrika:

"The kerchief—who has taken my rose kerchief?"

Ida, piecing things together, decided she owed something to the adopted boy this morning, namely that this particular morning should be his own and his departure take place with-

out scenes—everyday matters and her duties as a real mother could come later. And though she seldom gave orders she did so now, telling Ulrika to go back to bed and be quiet while they were getting Simon off, and assuring her that the kerchief would be found.

Out on the porch Simon thought of running over to Linda without Elof's noticing it, but every opening was barred because he had overslept. Elof had already cleaned out the cow barn and was now getting things ready for their departure in the stable doorway and in the yard. He talked and talked, using a tone of voice which was unnatural to both of them.

"Now we'll see what the March thaw has done to the surface of the main road."

Simon had no opinion to offer with regard to the state of the road.

"You can complain to the parson if Aunt Tyra gets too strict with you."

Elof, usually so taciturn, was standing there, actually making a joke. Simon knew how much it meant, but could not even thank him with a smile.

"But if I'm to tell the truth," Elof went on, still more confidentially, "Aunt Tyra's nothing to be afraid of any more. She may sound like a grizzly bear, but it's all in her throat. Something has happened to her. You should have seen her in the old days, when she went about the farms, trimming boars and young rams. Why, the children used to hide in the porch closet when they saw her coming down the hill. And when I went to confirmation classes myself, we were more scared of Aunt Tyra than of the parson, believe me. But something has happened to the old woman. She don't go trimming boars any more. You can take my word for it, she's not trimmed anything for the past twenty years."

There was beauty in the sky and on the snow and in the air that morning. Elof was to drive Aunt Tyra and all six boys who were to be confirmed down to the Church village, and this too was, in a way, an honor for Simon. Elof had put sleighbells on the horse—the whole world seemed to be trying to cheer Simon up, and make a fuss over him. It twined itself round him on all sides, so that he could not escape anywhere to fetch . . . He looked beseechingly at Elof for a breathing space, to put in, "I've forgotten something over at the West Stahls', I must get. It'll only take five minutes. You can wait that long, can't you?" But Elof interpreted his doglike glances as the expression of some kind of filial apprehension over being confirmed, and entering grown-up life. A foster-father ought, perhaps, to have something to say on a morning like this, but words had never been Elof's language, and the boy would have to understand what he was trying to say from the trouble he took.

Elof went rambling on about sleigh rugs and about the cottage in the Church village, which his father and Egron's had built the year the church was finished, and told yet another story about Aunt Tyra—if she was up to her old tricks, Simon would have to come home and complain, ha, ha, ha! Then Ida appeared, with the blue provision box and the case with Simon's clothes, and the air was fresh and clear and humming with the excitement of departure. If one listened, one could hear the voices of the other village boys further up the hill, as they stood outside the cottages, calling goodbyes to parents and envious small brothers and sisters.

"Up you jump, lad," Elof said, and Simon clambered onto the sleigh like an old man and sat down at the back. "You can take the reins, if you like," the farmer offered, but Simon did not hear him.

Ida came forward, and secretly pressed a bun into his hand, saying:

“Don’t you be scared, Simon. Everything will be all right—just you wait and see.”

They drove off into the bright sunshine, to jingling sleigh-bells. The horse was mad with joy, and Simon wanted to die.

IDA told Ulrika to calm herself, that the rose kerchief was sure to turn up.

Linda had actually been on her way to the East Stahls' that evening to give it back and say she had stolen it as a joke. But at the village crossroads she had changed her mind for fear they would not believe her, and only think something dreadful.

Thus one day passed, and then another, and on the third day Ulrika became rebellious, and refused to be put off any longer. Mamma wasn't to imagine that she, Ulrika, could not put two and two together, even if she hadn't been clever enough to be let off classes at school. And, as it was Mamma herself who had solemnly presented Ulrika with the kerchief, telling her to keep it for herself and even to wear it at her sisters' confirmations, Ulrika now insisted that Ida should stand by her word and fetch the piece of silk back from wherever it was, so that she could count, at least, on wearing it at her own confirmation.

If the whole matter had not been so unpleasant, Ida would almost have laughed at Ulrika, who had reached an age when little girls behave like old women and spout the usual phrases of gossip. She was just fourteen, and irresistible. But the fact remained, she had been given a kerchief and it was no longer in the house. This was hard on Ulrika, but infinitely worse for two others—namely, Simon and Hanna. It seemed to Ida that

she had somehow promised Simon to look after the matter for him. She felt that she had to go over to the West Stahls' and feel her way.

For Hanna, a visitor could not have come at a better moment. Linda was sitting at the loom, in which she had lately become utterly absorbed. Hanna had let her have her way, supplied her with spools, tightened the bolt, adjusted the sticks, and helped with other small services which were usually considered only fit for little girls.

"I see that you've been ousted from the loom," Ida said.

"Yes, the child's so keen on weaving now it's all I can do to keep her in spools," Hanna complained. She tried to sound modest but could, herself, hear the maternal pride in her voice.

"Well, now, that's not bad. Ulrika hasn't begun at the loom yet, although she's a year older." Ida sounded so meek that Hanna had to redress the balance by saying that Linda's weaving was only a whim, after all, and not to be compared with the everyday industry of Ulrika.

"And Ulrika can make oatmeal bread—I've heard she bakes like a grown housewife already. That's more than Linda can do."

Hanna busied herself with the coffee, and the pleasure of the visit brought red spots to her cheeks. Apart from Simon and an occasional hired hand, visitors seldom came to the farm, which was not so situated that neighboring housewives passed it in winter. She knew that up in the village the women often went to each other's houses without any particular errand, simply to see one another. In earlier years, when she herself had had to tramp from farm to farm looking for Linda, she had sometimes imagined what it would be like to have a daughter who sat at home working when a neighbor's wife called in to ask for her child, or to make time pass with gossip. She had

thought of herself standing in her own warm kitchen, going about the coffee-making, and now it seemed that reality did, after all, have such an ideal moment in store for her. Linda was red too, and sat thumping the batten, counting the threads and guiding the shuttles, pretending not to notice the others.

"Won't you take a cup with us?" Hanna said as she poured out the coffee.

"I haven't time," Linda replied, without looking up.

The women went on making suitable remarks about this zeal, but Ida covertly took a closer look at the girl's red cheeks—were they due only to interest in her work, or did they have some other cause?

When they had finished the first cup, Hanna invited Ida to look at the weave. It was intended as material for a summer skirt, and Linda had been allowed to design the stripes herself. What did Ida think of it? Hanna asked.

"You've made real northern lights in that border of yours, Linda. I'd like to see any woman in the village dare imitate it—they'd all know she'd taken it from your skirt."

"You don't think it's indecently gaudy, do you?" Hanna inquired.

"No, of course not. I didn't mean that. I just meant that it's so unusual. No—besides it's really beautiful."

"It's not always easy for us to be so sure, living as we do at the end of the road," Hanna said, growing for a moment quite affected, out of pure contentment at this chat over a weave.

But Ida and Linda exchanged a glance which was far from contented—for Ida had put a question in the word "taken," and Linda had replied by not understanding it. Ida continued being sociable toward Hanna.

"It's different with different people. Some are born with their heads stuffed full of patterns, whereas others have to

learn how. You must have heard what Dan's Louise says: 'I knew how to make lots of different shirt stripes, I did, before I married Dan.' "

Hanna smiled, but did not look at Ida, her eyes wandering about and finally settling on Linda. And for the second time she decided that they lived on the outskirts of everything. She, who did not even think a little boasting about normal, honest wooing among your people amusing, now had a thirteen-year-old daughter who almost had a suitor. Would other mothers of the village really think that game innocent? Every age had its privileges; small children were allowed to lie together because they could not sin, while grownups might share a bed because they knew what sin was and could guard themselves against it. But young people old enough perhaps to be able to sin, and yet still too childish to know which things were sinful, were for safety's sake not allowed to do anything at all. Hanna began to feel almost dizzy, for the presence of Ida made her aware of the full extent of the danger. What if that was Ida's real errand? Oh, if only Stahl were alive. She felt so weak; she was nothing, she did not deserve to have a child.

"One's lucky if one has someone to learn from," Hanna said in a low voice.

"On the contrary, I'd say it's far better when one's born with it. A girl with such a talent can go on inventing stripes forever, even if she should become an old maid or only have a single suitor. After all, she who has the gift is independent."

At this, Hanna began laughing with her mouth and eyes and heart. What a silly goose she was—a suspicious old hermit woman, casting gloom over a lovely April evening when a kind neighbor came in with so much comfort; and her own daughter was sitting there, so well built and chubby, a real picture of health.

"Did you hear what Ida's saying?" she asked. Linda mumbled something over the loom.

Hanna poured out a second cup, making herself still more at home in the present. She wasn't going to allow any more misgivings to creep in.

"Well, now we have the cottage full of confirmands, so to speak, and it's a terrible lot of work."

"Yes," Hanna replied, "Linda and me won't have to think about that for another year."

"But I can't help feeling a bit anxious about Simon. The lad was so white and queer-looking, the morning he left."

"Most likely he was scared of coming out among strangers. I can remember how it was with me, when I first went to Bible school."

"Or maybe it's because he's got to that particular age. But you'd think a boy who's as naturally good as Simon wouldn't have to be scared of anything."

Hanna grew apprehensive again. She and Ida had never spoken a word to each other about the summer loan of Simon. What might Ida have thought? But there remained that unmentionable, unforgettable morning beside the woodpile at Old Farm, and the great teeth of a scythe, glittering in the sun.

"Simon'll be all right," she said dejectedly.

Linda gave the batten two heavy thumps. While she was rethreading the shuttles, Ida said in a low voice:

"If he isn't too easily influenced."

Once again, Linda thumped with the batten, making Ida wonder, and Hanna exclaim warningly:

"Aren't you beating too hard now, child?"

"Don't forget that it can make a stiff stripe in your skirt," Ida followed up, veering away from the delicate subject. "My mother was short-tempered as a girl, and the weft was often unevenly beaten. And when the weave was to be taken down,

my father used to tease her and say, 'Now we'll see how many tantrums you had while you were weaving!' Yes, the old people really had a lot of queer ideas."

Hanna and Ida smiled their agreement. Linda went on weaving.

"Customs were simple, though, in those days—when you think how young people are now," Ida continued. "Why, I'd scarcely as much in my wedding outfit as Ulrika's got to have for her confirmation. There's been preparations and talk from morning to night, so I told the girl yesterday that me and her dad will have to move out into the barn, to make room for all the finery."

Hanna sat there listening, quite captivated by her neighbor. What a good time they must have at Old Farm with so many daughters and such an easy-going housewife. No wonder Linda was always running over there.

"But don't you believe it's always as amusing as all that. The younger ones get jealous of Ulrika and impatient at being so small, and they want to try on her things and feel everything. And then something'll get lost and Ulrika's real nasty until it turns up again. Last week, Eva took a button and hid it inside the clock case, and went fingering it when nobody was looking. It wasn't quite right, perhaps, but I still had to defend the little one when Ulrika went for her."

"There can't have been much evil in it when she gave the button back herself," said Hanna.

"No, that's just what I told Ulrika. But now, you see, she's missed her kerchief, and she won't calm down. It's white and rose embroidered and gay, and I said to Elof this must be our punishment for buying too much finery for the girl."

"Mightn't it be Maria, this time, who's playing tricks?" Hanna suggested.

"I just don't know what to think. Most likely Ulrika her-

self has moved it around so often she don't remember where she put it last."

"Well, a kerchief's easier to find than a button, and it'll surely turn up."

"Oh, yes, I'm not worrying. But you can imagine what a din there is, with three girls in the house. You've a quiet time of it in comparison, Hanna."

Linda thumped the weaving batten again, and this time a thread broke off.

"What did we tell you, child!" her mother exclaimed.

"I'll fix it myself," Linda said sullenly, crouching over the warp.

"Shan't I look for the thread for you? It's important that it should come in the right groove of the reed. Else you'll have trouble later on," said Hanna. Linda pretended not to hear.

"Well, I mustn't be sitting here all evening—I'd better get home and see to my girls," Ida declared.

"It was nice of you to take time and come over to us."

"I felt I just had to. But you mustn't forget your next-door neighbor, either, Hanna. Come in and see us one day. We who live down here at the bottom of the hill surely don't need special errands in order to get together." With these words, Ida left, and Hanna went with her out to the barn, to feed the cows.

Linda slipped down from the weaving stool and looked out of the window. She saw the women exchange a few words in the yard and then go across to the barn. Were they looking at the cows, she wondered? Or continuing their nagging about the kerchief?

Now was her chance to give the wretched thing back, and she went into the porch bedroom where it was hidden, stuffed it into her pocket and ran over to Old Farm. Standing in the

porch she could hear the three girls giggling and chattering inside.

Linda decided to join them flouncing about in the front room and the kitchen and find an opportunity to slip the kerchief back into the drawer without being noticed. But when she entered, the girls stopped talking and became as silent as if the district policeman was at the door. They sat down in a row on the woodbox, sending a shower of glances at Linda. She felt suddenly alone, and unable to take a step forward or to say a word, the Elof girls being in entire possession of the kitchen.

"You stare as if you'd never seen people before. Is there soot on my nose, or what?"

Ulrika, Maria and Eva looked at each other, giggled and whispered among themselves, and then turned to stare at her again. Linda, who had come to restore peace and a kerchief, grew sad and angry and jealous. Why couldn't she be in the midst of things, too? Why didn't she have anyone who clung and whispered to her?

Sitting entwined in this manner, each Elof girl looked more important than she was on her own. They seemed to steal significance from their sisterhood while Linda stood there shrinking and feeling smaller than she was.

"You seem to think yourselves real young ladies," she choked. Her throat ached, and she searched for bad language to express her feelings. "But what you really look like is a lot of ostriches, believe me. Like real—real frogs!" she exploded.

The Elof girls put their heads together again and dutifully carried out a girlish giggle, but without enjoying it any more.

Linda thought about Simon, herself and the rose kerchief and then again about herself.

She was not part of any set, she wasn't in the midst of things

anywhere, she was only a tiny dot on the side. Why should she bother her head about that kerchief? She could easily keep it. The Elof girls had each other and she had nobody and nothing.

For a moment she met Ulrika's gaze, and then broke away with a laugh.

"Have it your own way!"

Ulrika's face sobered, and she sent Linda a glance which said that she repented, that surely they could make things up, and that nothing mattered if only she got back . . . But it was too late, and Linda went off laughing with her big white teeth. She passed through the doorway like a wind and, from the woodbox, the giggles of the Elof girls sounded small and dusty.

On her way home, Linda met Ida, who said, in a knowing, motherly voice:

"That was sensible of you, my dear."

Linda answered in the same tone of voice:

"It was good of you to come over and see Mamma, Aunt Ida."

They went off in opposite directions, and Ida looked round behind her once, but Linda did not turn her head.

At home, Linda went into the porch room, which was cold and untidy. Among the rubbish there was an old mirror, which she had hung up beside the window. Taking out the kerchief, she draped it round her shoulders, caressing it and stroking it and humming softly as she pirouetted in front of her reflection.

O lovely rose-leaf kerchief, you are like a tiny chamber full of joy and pain. My Linda bride, my lovely maiden, I do so want to give you the best things in the world. I met a kindly gentleman who said to me, Good day, friend Simon, you seem

to me a splendid fellow. What would you like as a gift, tell me and do not fear. Thank you indeed, my gentle sir, there is one thing I desire and that's a kerchief, strewn with roses, a silk scarf to give my Linda, a shawl of silk with a fringe as soft as Linda's hair, my lovely girl. My friend, is that your only wish? How do you like this simple scarf, once bought in Mesopotamia, tamia, ta mia. . . . Oh, thank you indeed, my gentle sir, it's as if it were made for fair Linda, my loveliest Linda. . . . Look, my beloved, my bright maid, a small gift to you from your Simon, who is as attached to you as the fringe is to a scarf, a Simonscarf, a silken soul. . . .

The western sky was purple-blue, yet it was almost dark inside the cottage. Linda was so far away from reality that she did not hear Hanna coming in. When Hanna saw her there was a skirmish, each of them seizing one end of the kerchief and pulling it in opposite directions. Linda did not let go until her mother began to wail, exactly as she had done one evening long ago. . . .

"Take it, then," Linda cried, letting go of her end. She shook the whole matter off, and stood there, smiling. But Hanna ran backward and forward in the room, moaning, "Oh, no, oh, no, no, no, no no!" and throwing the kerchief from one hand to the other, as though it were red hot.

"Why are you going on like that?" Linda said, adding, "Why don't you take the thing to Old Farm, if it's theirs."

Hanna continued to lament, and Linda sulked.

"Simon gave it to me. I exchanged it for something. How was I to know where he had got hold of it?"

Hanna rushed at Linda, her arms raised as if she wanted to strike her, but only managed to utter a louder cry.

"I'm off, if you're to carry on like that," said Linda, going out on the porch and muttering to herself:

"I haven't done anything much, have I!"

She wandered into the kitchen and meant to sit down at the loom, but was forced to go out, to avoid her mother's voice. Picking up the milk pail and stool, she remarked in an ordinary tone of voice:

"I'll go and do the milking."

Linda had scarcely been in the barn that winter, but she knew what had to be done and worked energetically to get away from herself for a while. When she had finished and come back into the kitchen, her mother had gone. She'll be sitting wailing at the Elofs' now, thought Linda.

She made porridge, dusted and swept the kitchen and then sat down to weave, for she could not stand being unoccupied.

It was past eleven when her mother got back, frozen to the bone and silent. Linda piled more logs on the fire, fried the porridge in slices and laid the table, without saying a word. Then she sat down again at the loom.

They did not go to bed until long after midnight. Hanna fell asleep with the silken kerchief, like a burn, between her breasts.

THE snow melted with a thunderous din. This snow was unbearably white to look at, but it was delicious to close one's eyes in the clear air. All the village horses were out on the carting jobs which had to be done while there was still enough snow for the sleighs, such as transporting manure to spread on the fields, and trundling in the last loads of hay to the barn.

On just such a day, with nothing but fresh smells, when the Village Whisper decreed that faces should be happy, and most of the villagers were happy, Hanna Stahl roamed about in the brushwood beneath Elof's land, up to her knees in wet snow—it was the third day she had wandered, from early morning to dusk.

Meanwhile, someone else came plodding into the village, a person who used to be happy, regardless of the decrees of the Whisper, simply because he was born that way.

Simon was on his way back, having been sent home a few days before Easter. It was good to know that he would see Linda, he thought—indeed, it was necessary. If only there had not been that letter from the parson to Elof. Simon was not naturally suspicious but, nevertheless, he was worried about what the contents might be.

He arrived in the afternoon, and although he would have preferred to go straight to Linda, he had to take the letter up

to Elof first. He arrived at Old Farm soaked to the bone, just as the family had sat down to dinner.

The distance from the church hamlet to the village was eighteen miles. He had been given a lift in a cart half the way and had walked the rest. Now he was dripping wet, all wrong in some way, and he seemed to fill the entire kitchen. How easy everything had been when he came to Old Farm as a small boy for the first time, so small indeed that he could have found room in a crack in the wall—a tiny sprite who had been able to think up little services that required doing, and creep forth to perform them in secret. And now he was a big, clumsy creature, who attracted so much attention that nobody seemed to see anything else when he was about.

The Elofs sat gaping and he had to stand by the door a long time while they stared. At last Ida told Ulrika to put out a plate for him and beckoned him to come forward and have something to eat. He sat down at the table and they gazed at him in silence. Gone was the friendly chatter of the morning of his departure. Now reproaches and questions loomed up out of the silence. He found it difficult to get the food down, although he was hungry.

Elof finished ahead of the others and, laying his spoon in the table drawer and pushing away his plate, he asked:

“Now, boy, what’s the meaning of this?”

Simon rose, took out the parson’s letter, handed it to Elof and went out.

LINDA'S body was shaken by a storm and she stood in the front-room window, hating the village. Then she went across to the mirror and looked at herself. If only an earthquake would happen, something which would suddenly hurl her out of the present. Imagine waking up, happy and free, among strangers, among the children of the world, far away. She herself would tumble about in the midst of things, and be made much of.

She went over to the loom. Many threads had been broken off. The spools were empty and her mother was out—instead of being there to tie knots and quill, so that Linda could weave. She felt that she needed to strike something, break something.

Back she went, to the mirror and the window. And to the half-conscious dream of a dark robber in the woods who would take her by surprise, and with whom she would wrestle and fight until he conquered her because he was so terribly big and heavy and strong.

Let us mourn unhappy Linda . . . the unfortunate victim of the ravisher . . . pale as a lily . . .

Galling that she should look so healthy and rosy-cheeked.

The storm dredged up muddy, turgid thoughts. "*Cleanse me from all sin . . . forgive us our trespasses. . .*"

But she had no right to pray—almost before she came to the "I" in forgive, a sinful longing crowded out her repentance.

She was not good friends with God. Every Sunday, at the meetings, there were lessons about the children of the world, whom one must guard against. During the week Linda longed to meet some of these children, longed until her heart felt like breaking. They were bad inside and had fun with all kinds of amusements outside.

"But I must say, God, it isn't easy to know what to do when one is bad inside and feels like a thundercloud. When one has a greater longing for the robber than for the Good Samaritan."

No, she was not on good terms with God. And Egron, her father, was now sitting up there beside the Almighty, able to see everything she thought or did. And when she was really sinful, he would give God a poke in the side, point to her, and whisper, "Look how unrighteous the girl is." And, because Egron was dead, God believed him more than he did Linda, who was still rolling about the earth like an angry cloud. They were gossiping about her up there and nodding to each other, and Dad had a long, celestial white beard, and was now so like the Lord they could scarcely be told apart. "*Thou thyself from everything must sever*," they said, if Linda was listening in their direction. But she turned a deaf ear. Sometimes, however, she replied with evil cunning:

"Mustn't I have done something first, before I can sever myself from it? You up there, having such fun with all those angels and harps. Why is it that you don't allow me anything? You're so jealous that . . . And I haven't really any fun at all even though I'm as black as pitch with sin. I have nobody, I tell you. I'm neither allowed to be with the children of the world nor with the children of the village. Not even a robber will come along and put up with me!"

She gazed into the mirror with her eyes half closed. She

was hardly any longer awake when suddenly she saw the kitchen door open, and thought that perhaps the robber might be coming in a dream. But it was Simon and she woke up and was disappointed.

How childish he looked, and how wet, and blue, standing there. He had nothing with him; he only wanted something from her, and it was the wrong day for that. Yet she was carried away by his guileless trust, and he played with her in such a way that she, in the end, had to be herself. They went into the porch room and did the mamma-mamma-baby game and with his face resting on her throat, he tried to tell her a little about the Bible school. Out of her silken kerchief he had made a doll, with a hollow between its legs, for hadn't Linda herself told him to use it as a consolation? And the doll had been the one good thing, everything else being so hard and difficult. But then he had lost the doll and someone had found it and taken it to the parson. He had asked whose it was and Simon had then replied that it was his, and been happy at the thought of getting it back. But the parson became terribly angry and did not return it. And one evening Simon, miserable unto death, went to the parsonage to ask for it back. But then the parson had thrown it into the stove so that it had burned up in front of Simon's eyes, and said this was the last straw and he ought to be sent to a reformatory, and had written a letter to Elof and sent it off with him. And, another time, during a lesson, when he had just been sitting there longing for Linda and had not remembered any of his Catechism, the parson said he should show that he at least knew the Lord's Prayer, and Simon had made a slip of the tongue and began to recite "Linda Stahl which art in Heaven," and all the boys had sniggered, and the parson thought Simon had

done it out of spite and had given him a box on the ears and sent him out of the room.

Linda was scarcely listening. He was so light, Simon, he was really not worth wrestling with. She could sense his bones through the skin; they were fragile, like dried twigs.

"God. Thou Who loveth little children, protect him so that he won't get broken! I'm the only one who knows what he's really like, but I am away today."

He poured himself into her hand and offered up a sob of enjoyment, but she did not receive his abandonment as she used to, for her body was seething with a storm and she wanted to scream. Simon was partaking of something in which she had no part and she begrudged him this. She did not need this child, but someone big, someone who would fight her and tear off her clothes and conquer. For a moment the sun returned, with memories of Simon, memories of words about him which she had thought up, memories of promises made. Once his gentleness had been enough for her, and the best thing in her life. But that was so distant, there were years between them now. A wave of misery and of tears for their lost childhood swept through her, enveloping him too, and she wished they were brother and sister, babies once more, on the knees of a warm, fat mother with room for them both. She sobbed, calling out:

"Mamma! Mamma, where are you?"

Neither of them had heard the door creak. And suddenly Elof was standing over them. He took the boy by the scruff of the neck, lifted him up and bent him over backward. Simon's throat was slender in proportion to his large head. It rested in the grip of the man's finger and thumb, and the boy looked up at him in silent terror.

Ida came into the room after him and began stammering

and lamenting. Elof dragged Simon outside and both of them were silent and whitefaced, quite beside themselves. His wife stayed on, trying to find out from Linda what Simon had done, but the girl hid her face in the pillow and did not answer.

When Hanna came back she met Elof and Simon on the road and Elof gave her a look which repelled the lightning attack she had made on him the previous summer. Simon, the object of this war of eyes, now went off in Elof's direction, but was worthless booty.

IDA stood on the porch at the West Stahls', giving an account of how they had caught Simon at the worst thing imaginable.

"And I must say, Hanna, I sometimes used to think that Linda was much too casual in her behavior with the boy; after all, we know he's fourteen now. But this time I have to excuse the girl, although everyone must know I've taken as much care of that boy as if he'd been my own son . . . But, as I was saying, when Elof and me came in, the first thing we heard was that girl of yours shouting 'Mamma' at the top of her voice, and crying fit to break her heart."

Suddenly Hanna's voice seemed to possess an excess of loudness, mockery and authority. She was exultant.

"So Linda called out 'Mamma,' did she? Well, she meant me. Don't you believe she meant anyone else. For it's me that brought her into the world, I'd like you to know. You were there yourself, Ida, remember? You came in when the child was only an hour out of my womb and you'd have been in at the birth, too, if you hadn't been so far gone yourself with Maria. But you saw me when I was carrying her, like this, with my belly in the air, and you saw me just after, too. So you can bear witness that I was the one who gave her birth. No one else but me has the right to come to her when Linda calls for Mamma."

And Ida imagined herself saying, "That's what I've always said; an older woman can't take these things as natural as a young one."

"No, no, of course not," she replied, adding, "but you must understand it's hard for me, too, even though I haven't exactly given birth to the boy. The parson writes that he ought to be sent to a reformatory. That's our reward for being unsuspicious, and having a new confirmation suit made for him."

"So the parson wrote that? Well, I don't intend to put a word in for that scoundrel. Away with him, the little bastard, that's all."

Jealousy taught Hanna words she had never spoken before.

"Becuse I'm Linda's mamma, and he's no right at all to pretend it's him, I tell you. He hasn't any right at all. Oh, if only I had a leather strap, I'd let him have it!"

"Now, now, just you go in and comfort that girl of yours. Some way'll be found to deal with the boy," Ida said, thinking that women who bear children late in life go peculiar sooner or later.

"It's me who bore her and me who's Linda's mamma—tell that to that calf of yours," Hanna cried once more, her hand on the doorknob.

She entered the house, with her nose and skirts dripping. The two weeks' agony which had weighed her down were gone, and she would have blown her nose in the rose kerchief, had she happened to have it in her hand.

"Stahl and his decrees. I'll understand just as much as I choose—d'you hear that? I'll not obey any more—I've a child I bore myself."

She went into the bedroom and looked at Linda, who was lying on the bed.

"That publican—that Pharisee," she spat.

"Mamma, I'm sick," Linda said mildly. "There's blood coming from me."

"And haven't I told you to watch out with that little bast—that fathead? . . ."

Linda reflected that it could scarcely be Simon's fault that she was ill now, but felt that he was blameworthy in another way. You surely could not feel so unjustly treated unless someone had actually done something to you. And she hadn't wanted to play mamma-mamma-baby with Simon at all, that day.

I suppose there may be un-get-at-able reasons for being angry with someone, she thought, listening with indolent self-pity to her mother's outburst.

"Is it dangerous to bleed like this?" she asked.

Hanna brought her a towel and helped her to pin it on.

"No," she said, "but you've started early. I was sixteen when I had my first cleansing."

"Is it something everybody has?"

"No, only us women."

"How unfair," Linda said. So there really was a reason for being angry with Simon.

Hanna started up, filled with fresh suspicion. "I hope to goodness it is your cleansing—if it isn't . . . what exactly did the boy do to you?"

"Why, nothing at all," Linda answered, in her old irritated voice.

"You aren't fibbing, are you? I hope the worst hasn't happened—we'll see in a month's time whether it's your cleansing or . . . You'd better tell the truth, girl."

But Linda did not understand what her mother was asking about, and was silent. Hanna went into the kitchen and boiled some milk for Linda and herself, muttering threats against "that bastard calf."

ELOF locked Simon in the porch bedroom and Ida sent the girls up to their grandmother. Then they both sat down at the kitchen table and cowered over the parson's letter, which was hardly an elevating text. Having equipped him so splendidly, they were now recompensed by his disgracing his foster home with "Proof of an imagination, the expression of which must wound the most elementary feelings of propriety and decency." And it had certainly been brought home to them that the parson was not exaggerating. But reformatory was a dismal word—and they had always thought that those who were sent to such a place "looked different" from Simon.

"The thing is we've three daughters. How long d'you think he'll spare them?" Ida asked.

"Don't talk that way. You make me scared of myself," Elof replied, his teeth chattering.

He went off to consult with Ant Viktor, feeling that a fellow villager with wide knowledge of spiritual matters ought to help him make a decision.

Ant Viktor looked up the Bible text for the day, which read:

"Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit."

Whether Simon should be considered as a branch to be

taken away or whether he should be purged, was more than Ant Viktor was prepared to say on his own. As Simon was nobody's son, it was incumbent on the Conscience of the Village to examine the case and express an opinion.

The upshot was that Elof and Ant Viktor made a round of the west side of the village, summoning every householder, and there were discussions in the front rooms, on porches, at crossroads and in stable doorways, until they wound up in Elof's kitchen.

The Village Whisper had come along with them.

Josef began:

"He should have had his nose blown with a hard-frozen glove."

The others smiled, for Josef was known to be the most peaceable man in the village.

"If the boy's proved really guilty, he should be punished. On the other hand there's no greater iniquity on earth than the condemnation of an innocent man. Justice must be our goal," said Erik Annorsa. He was more upset than any of the others, both by nature and by the subject itself. He had once himself been in the claws of the law, as the saying went.

"You're always going on about justice. Surely there's something called mercy, too?" said Pers Simon, the watchmaker. He was a bachelor, and ought not to have been permitted to take part in the council.

"Mercy, did you say? Just you try going to earthly courts talking about mercy! You may be as innocent as a lamb, yet they'll convict you on false evidence. As if people who don't even care about justice should be thinking of mercy! You don't know what you're talking about, man, because you've never been through it," Erik Annorsa exclaimed. "But I could tell you a thing or two . . ."

"Are we here to discuss your case, or that of the adopted boy?" Ant Viktor interrupted.

"I only wanted to make it plain to Pers Simon that this thing is a human concern and that the mercy he harps on belongs to the courts of Heaven. And if we were more particular about justice here on earth, we'd likely put up a better appearance on the Day of Judgment. That was the only thing I wanted to say," he concluded, his cheekbones glowing above his black beard.

Ant Viktor, who always chaffed Erik Annorsa when he had a chance, said:

"You'd better let Karin be your spokesman, Erik, then you'll put in your best appearance."

"But what's the boy done that's so unnatural?" Ahl queried. It was like Ahl to put a question of that sort. In his house, where the animals took first place, human affairs were treated all too lightly. Ahl was not actually independent of the Village Whisper, but moved on its lowest levels and could sometimes be considered its very foundation.

"Read for yourself," Elof said, handing him the parson's letter with its description of an obscene doll, the blasphemous use of God's name, and so on.

Besides, he surely must have gathered what the boy had been trying to do with Linda that started her yelling at the top of her voice for her mother when Elof and Ida arrived, just in time to release her.

"Seems like there's some misunderstanding here as far as I can see. The parson's not been able to make out the lad. The boy's never been very bright, I will say, but there's a good many of us that aren't, going about freely all the same. The parson maybe thought that silly grin he has in his thick head

is some kind of impudence, but we who know him—you, Elof—surely there's nothing bad in him?"

"What about the doll?" Elof asked.

"Shhh—! Surely it's too childish to be making a fuss about such a thing."

"Don't make yourself out a fool, Ahl, you know well enough what he was using it for."

"Well, for pity's sake, ain't he just at the age of a bull calf! It's got to grow out on them, sometime, an' it can't happen unnoticed. And supposing he has been practicing a bit on his own—what's so extraordinary about that?"

The others had to smile, in spite of themselves.

"But this latest business with Eggron's wench—what do you say about that, you that have half-grown daughters yourself?"

"There's not many words needed there. If the heifer ain't willing, the bull won't."

"Look you, Ahl, it's a question here of young folks, not cattle that can't have any morals."

"Aye, the creatures is decent by nature," Ahl snapped.

Now that he had proclaimed his theory about household animals, which he always found applicable, his audience turned away. But Ahl continued, with mounting wrath:

"You think Linda's all that innocent and natural, do you? She's not to be sent to any institution to learn what's what?"

"Linda's a girl with very particular gifts," Josef broke in. "We've got to take care of Linda."

Ahl was almost hopping with rage.

"Particular gifts, has she? I like that. I suppose it doesn't matter at all how a person uses his gifts?"

"I was there when she foretold her father's death," Josef said quietly.

The men were torn between respect for the memory of

Egron Stahl's death and a desire to laugh at Ahl, who hadn't touched an axe for seven years.

"Linda may be a bit forward, but she did call for help this time," Ant Viktor declared, fishing up a law from Moses about the importance of the virgin's cry.

"Why do we have to do something terrible to the lad?" Pers Simon asked. "Maybe he don't even know he did wrong."

"You haven't got three daughters, you!" Elof exclaimed.

"He's been going to village prayers most every Sunday for years, and what he didn't know about these things the parson was busy telling him. You can't hardly call him unenlightened."

"Surely someone could have a talk with him, without being all that strict?"

"You've got no sons, Pers Simon," said Erik, adding, "If our boys aren't made to understand that these things are solemn . . ."

"I know well enough they're solemn," Pers Simon retorted. He was a bachelor going on forty and becoming ridiculous with his dreamy explanation, "I haven't yet found the Right One. . . ."

"But if the youngsters think it's allowed, they'll be fathers before they're out of pinafores themselves, and then we won't have a community any more."

"No, then we'll soon be back at the animal stage," said Elof, who was descended from the first settlers.

Ahl puffed and glared, his neck swelling. But he said nothing.

"In any case, it's a question for our conscience, this thing with the boy," Pers Simon persisted.

"It's not the only one," Erik Annorsa said. "There's a good many other questions."

"Widows and orphans shall sit in the front pew in our

conscience," Ant Viktor, who read the village prayers, declared.

"There are people that get sent to prison unjustly and are unjustly reduced to poverty, and the countryside they come from has little room for them in its conscience. If fornicating boys are to be made much of now, the innocent will no longer be taken into account."

"I'm only talking about this boy, here, just now. He's fatherless, too."

"His father wasn't from this village. Maybe he's alive still. That was a man with a conscience, all right."

"You can blame conscience to get out of doing something, too. Just by letting things slide and not bothering to be unpleasant. But those who are born insolent and without conscience will then take over while you're asleep. And soon there won't be anyone left who knows what conscience is. The word itself will be forgotten."

"You're talking about things far ahead. But this boy . . ."

"Conscience, in particular, must surely have foresight and a bit of common sense. If it wants to survive."

"A conscience that calculates like that can't have much life in it."

"Now you're all going on again as if we were gods," Erik Annorsa broke in, angrily. "It's a question here of a poor little village where it's hoped that as many as possible may live and prosper and enjoy increasing honor and respect from other villages. You can take that sort of talk to pot-bellied farmers on the coast—the kind that's sitting high and dry. Here, the struggle even for bread's so hard that anyone who's in a position to feed himself and his family can feel he has a clean conscience. If, over and above that, he gives a helping hand to a widow or two in the village, he can call it quits. And

that's the truth. Only those who have their barns full of corn can afford to take pity on the weeds."

"But couldn't the lad be given a good talking to? Surely we don't have to send him away!"

"Will you be responsible for keeping an eye on him? Surely you don't think this will be enough to stop him, do you?" Erik demanded.

"If he were your own flesh and blood, Elof . . ."

"I have three daughters; it's their father I am."

"S'posing it should turn out that the girl Linda . . ."

"Hanna's had enough sorrows already. We can't kill Hanna off."

"Hanna said to Ida that she couldn't imagine any punishment bad enough for the sinner," Elof declared.

"And when a woman as goodhearted as Hanna says something like that, it's worth listening to. Hanna's not one to complain unnecessarily."

Then the story of the rose kerchief was brought up, how it had disappeared the morning Simon went away, only to be found on the porch the afternoon he came home. It had probably been intended as a new doll, or as a present for Linda. This must in any case be regarded as theft and an aggravating circumstance in judging the boy's character.

The men's voices buzzed back and forth. Somebody hinted that it would have been more suitable for the women to have decided the matter, despite its filthy nature. All levels of the Village Whisper were explored; they even brushed past the most elevated one, that which was almost a threat to the Whisper's continued existence. But neither Pers Simon nor Ahl, who favored the same solution with different justifications, commanded any attention. It was those who moved in the middle levels of the Whisper who made the decision.

"But the boy isn't to be condemned without a hearing. He hasn't been allowed to defend himself," said Erik Annersa. And they murmured that they must hear the sinner in person. Simon was then permitted to come into the kitchen. He was pale and had been crying, but he tried to smile all the same. It would have been better for him if he had managed to look serious, for the smile made him seem unreliable at a moment like this.

Elof tried to put a question, but his voice failed him. And so, Ant Viktor became the one to lead the embarrassing inquiry. He adopted the special tone of voice he was accustomed to use at village prayers, a kind of impersonal chanting which could carry the solemn words. There were things which were too solemn to be conveyed by an everyday voice, and could only be approached by intoning, or in a voice tremulous with shame.

Did Simon realize the injury he was doing himself by practicing such things before marriage? No, he hadn't felt any bad effects, the boy answered. He gave a smile which almost captivated the Village Whisper—oh, if only he had been a young goat or a flower! Didn't he understand he was hurting Linda? Simon blushed, but did not smile.

"Has Linda complained?" he asked in a low voice.

"You're the one who's here to answer questions, not us," said Ant Viktor, looking sternly at him.

"We played mamma-mamma-baby," he ventured.

"And didn't Linda mind your lying on top of her, without your trousers on?"

Simon's eyes filled with tears, but he said no, she didn't.

"What did I say? If there's anyone that's to be sent to a reformatory, it's that wench, Linda . . ." Ahl said, sulkily.

"No," Simon cried, "she didn't do anything."

"I see. But what were you doing to her when she called out for her mother?" said Ant Viktor, resuming the enquiry.

Simon was silent.

"Well, if you won't answer, we'll have to ask Linda."

Simon brightened. Linda was so clever—she would be able to explain the game to these severe men, so that they would understand what it was all about.

When they came out of the house, the April evening was soft and clear and Ant Viktor started to recite:

"It is moonlight and sleigh-white, and the sky is full of fiddlers and it's so cold that the old meadows are frozen over, and there is skating ice all the way up to the moon. . . ."

This was a snatch from an old local courting rhyme which all the grownups knew and used to smile at. But they did not like Ant Viktor bringing it up at this moment. The air was light and fresh, and each man really wanted to go home to his own farm and perhaps drive somewhere without reason along the silky blue sleigh tracks, instead of going along on this musty errand or being sucked into the mazes of the courting rhyme—just be uncomplicated and keep company with his horse.

But the Village Whisper demanded its rights.

"The main thing is to spare Hanna as much as possible . . ."

"We've come at a good time; there's a light in the barn."

LINDA stood on the porch steps looking down at the bearded flock of important village elders. There seemed to be more of them than there actually were, and even their homespun coats gave out authority.

This is the Village Whisper, she thought. In the center of the awe-inspiring dark group Simon's face shone white and was turned upward, as though it still rested in Elof's grip.

But the frightened expression was gone, and he looked at Linda with all his faith, because Linda was gifted and she had his life in her hand and her hand was soft.

Linda felt a twinge of pain in her stomach and suddenly loathed herself. She realized what it was all about, and that this round, beaming face was dear to her. But it was the wrong evening for carrying birds' eggs, the wrong day for wandering along the edge of a gorge with one's sweetheart.

Not that she was unaware of how fragile . . . she was the only one who did know.

But because of the anger in her hand which suddenly had to prove itself and because of the evil curiosity which suddenly demanded to know whether he would have time to catch hold of the birch tree, and what his eyes would look like and whether or not that wide grin of his would be wiped out . . .

A second of emptiness passed in which she felt as if someone had borrowed her. She saw him plunging on his head into

the gorge and then she screamed and was herself again, Linda, standing on the porch at Stahls'.

"I didn't want to! It wasn't me! I didn't want to!"

She stamped her feet and screamed in her despair, and cried so that she almost could not draw a breath.

"Nobody who sees this girl need doubt what she has been through," boomed Ant Viktor.

"Well, I still do," said Ahl. "To me it's all put on."

But the others did not listen to him. At first they were swept by a wave of compassion for the violated girl, and thankfulness that their own daughters were undamaged and then the wave receded in their anxiety for what might happen to their daughters and their fury turned against Simon and all their sons. Peaceable Josef stepped up on the porch and supported Linda, who looked as if she were going to faint, while Ant Viktor and Erik Annorsa took down Simon's trousers and flogged him, and in him all their sons.

Linda caught a glimpse of his narrow, boyish behind before she got inside the porch. There she stood in the dark, with bated breath, waiting for his yells. She heard the swish of the leather strap and the steps and the voices of the men.

"That's enough, now."

"Stop it, there."

And then Ant Viktor's Sunday voice, asking Simon:

"Do you want any more, boy?"

But Simon was so quiet that Linda almost suffocated.

She heard them moving off, and he still did not scream, and then she went to the top of the steps and watched the men striding off with Simon, and she did not follow them but just stood there, murmuring, "Forgive me, I didn't mean it to turn out like that, I was only joking." She made all the words

of repentance as small as possible to strip her treachery of its significance and consequences.

"Come back tomorrow," she whispered. "Then we'll go to the barn and be by ourselves."

At the crossroads there was a birch tree. Its black branches gleamed in the moonlight. She gazed at it in order to become indifferent, in order to turn the men's attention away from Simon, and to make the present seem unimportant. But the tree shrank and became very small, and moved closer, floating through the air and stopped in front of her and stood there silent, gleaming darkly. A naked tree, like the one she had once seen on a dead cheek.

WHEN Hanna came in from the barn, Linda was sitting on the hay stool, crying.

"It wasn't me that killed Father," she sobbed.

Hanna, who had shaken off her obedience that very day, thought fiercely that if she could not love the child without sinning then she would gladly sin. Stahl's death must die, at last. She said:

"Of course not, child, what a thing to believe. Surely men must have let an axe slip before now. What could you or I have done about it—we were in the potato patch all that afternoon, don't you remember?"

"Yes, but I'd said something to him the day before—about candy . . ." Linda only needed to hint, for Hanna remembered every word. But now they were to be forgotten, once and for all.

"As though anyone takes notice of the babbling of a six-year-old."

"Yes, but doesn't it say somewhere in the Bible, 'You fool, he has already committed murder in his heart,' or something like that?"

"Well—and what did Stahl burn in his heart when he burned up your doll, Gockan?" Hanna exclaimed.

(Sleep, Egron, sleep in Paradise, close to the Virgin Mary, don't listen to your widow down on earth . . .)

Hanna took off the clothes she wore in the barn, washed her hands and put the porridge saucepan on the fire.

Linda stopped short in the middle of her crying.

"Gockan . . . I'd forgotten about her."

Hanna shivered at the greedy look which crossed Linda's face, for she saw that the child had really forgotten Gockan, and was now simply savoring the injustice (Mary, preserve his repentance, Thou knowest it was genuine. There is nobody left on earth now to defend Egron Stahl).

Linda's misery became serious again.

"Mamma, there's another thing . . ."

Her mother went across to her and stroked her hair.

"If you only knew how happy it makes me that you really mean me," she whispered.

"There was something else Bible-ish. To do with Easter. Why did Jesus have to be crucified?"

"So that He could redeem mankind, surely you know that?"

"Then it wasn't only due to Judas?"

"Everything must have been preordained."

"If Judas hadn't sold Him—what would have happened then?"

"He probably couldn't help it."

"Supposing he had wanted not to—with all his might?"

"But he was born to be Judas."

"If it's true that he was destined from the very beginning to betray—if that was his part in life—then why was it said of him, 'Woe unto that man'? I don't understand how they could be so unfair to Judas."

"Yes, I know, but one has the right to leave those things alone which one doesn't understand," Hanna said, who still, when necessary, had recourse to the precepts of obedience.

"What would have happened about the redemption if Judas

had never lived or if he'd gone and hanged himself the day before! Why didn't he, the fathead . . . ?"

"How could he change what was preordained?"

"All the other disciples were so wise and good, they never lost their heads. But perhaps Judas loved Jesus more than anyone else. Judas was perhaps the only one who really knew what Jesus was like."

"Oh, no, the others must have known Him just as well."

"Mamma, are things preordained for everybody?"

"What difficult questions you ask. How do I know how it is these days? I suppose it's doubtful. It was mostly long ago, in the days of the Bible, that things were fulfilled."

"Mamma, I want to die."

Hanna fell on her knees in front of Linda, caressing her arms and hands.

"My child, my little child, how can you say such a thing?"

"But I can't go on living, the way I am."

"Why, you're only at the beginning of things—you're only a child. You won't be responsible for anything for many years."

"But why couldn't he help it?"

"Because there's bad blood in him, he's a bastard, a scoundrel; he's not worth thinking about."

"Where does it say that Judas was a bastard?"

"Linda, don't get lost in the Gospels and buzz round with questions that are so difficult not even real Bible scholars can answer them. Why, you haven't even been confirmed yet. You don't have to trouble your head about Judas. You are still in the grace of baptism. 'Suffer little children to come unto me, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. . . .' 'Jesus, tender Shepherd, hear me, bless Thy little lamb tonight . . .' Let us start all over again, Linda. Be my child as you used to.

Remember how we played together when you were tiny? Let's be babes again, Linda, and receive the Kingdom of Heaven like children. Now there is only you and me and nobody else. My Linda child, my Linda darling, let's sing before we go to rest! Do you remember how we used to sing: 'Thy broad white wings, O Jesu, spread gently over me, and let me quietly slumber, come good, come ill, with Thee.' "

"Mother, I want to go to Simon."

"Not tonight, Linda. It's so dark. They're already in bed at Old Farm."

"But I have to."

"Tomorrow, Linda, when it's light again."

“NOW we are going to change everything, Linda,” Hanna said gaily.

And as soon as she sensed that a gust of sorrow or tears was about to pass through the child, she was ready with a suggestion—something in the house was to be altered, a new apron was to be made for Linda, or Linda ought to go to the Annersas’ and ask permission to use their organ, on which she had already learned to play whole tunes. But Linda had lost interest in visiting neighbors, and did not even go to prayers during the first few weeks after Simon had been sent away.

“Shall we order an iron stove, Linda? And ask Dan to put it in for us?”

They had an iron stove bricked into the kitchen, and a strange being it was. But after a while Linda asked:

“Can it be the stove’s fault that it’s become so dreary here at night?”

“Linda, I have brought home some samples of wallpaper from the store,” Hanna said one night. “Don’t you think it’s time we papered the walls and made it look nice here?”

Linda selected a blue wallpaper with mauve flowers, and everything was going to be new.

The wallpaper duly arrived and gave the two women a couple of eager days. Linda balanced near the ceiling, put on the sticky strips, while Hanna crawled around, pasting them

above the floor boards. Then they smoothed it over with a hare's foot.

Thus they covered up "The small birds' prayer," and Beata Lindström's pilfering, "A decapitation will take place," and Millstones at Södermark and Co., the Norwegian question, the Queen's laryngitis and Dr. Retan's famous work, "Self-Preservation—a real treasure for all who suffer in consequence of the sins of youth."

But first they smeared paint over every word and then followed up with hares' feet, so that these walls should not accidentally be able to whisper about anyone who was not going to be part of their new life.

But, after a few days, Hanna began to suspect that Linda, even so, understood more than was good for a girl of her age; and she started squandering her savings.

"Do you think we should set up a new curtain weave this spring, Linda? Or shall we wait until autumn?"

"Linda, what about painting the chairs and the cupboards?"

"Linda, would you like an organ, or an accordion? I'll ask Efraim to write and order one. He can get it sent home."

"An accordion," Linda replied.

And it came. Whenever Linda relived her apprehensive wait for Simon's screams, and could hardly draw breath, she turned to the accordion, which was able both to scream and to breathe. In the summer evenings she used to sit out on the porch playing, while Ant Viktor's son, Leander, stood beside her chasing away the mosquitoes with a birch branch.

NINETEEN hundred and thirteen, in August, on a Saturday afternoon, and the sun casting shadows to the east of hayricks and houses.

Elof stood washing his hands in a basin which had been placed on the steps of the cottage in which he and his family lived in the summer, while Ida was out in the field, gathering early potatoes for the holiday.

Elof's mother, who was old and almost blind, sat on the porch of the winter cottage, polishing knives and forks with fine sand and now and again calling out: "Come and see if I haven't got a good shine on them." But the children were grown-up now and had no time to listen to such things as the rustle of the trees, or the mumblings of their grandmother.

"Father, can't you hurry up, so I can tidy the porch," said Ulrika.

"He won't die if he happens to see a hand basin, will he?" Elof retorted.

"Haven't you any shame in you, Eva, letting Mamma work in the potato patch while you stand around doing nothing?"

"Shhh—! Why don't you go there yourself? Who's being so fussy about her nails today!"

Eva had fetched two eggs and was on her way to the storeroom for a bag of flour.

"Surely you can take all that with you when you go out

this evening. Why waste time on it now?" Ulrika nagged. She herself was picking a posy of mignonette, but mostly busied herself with gazing up the hill.

"As it happens, that doesn't suit me," Eva snapped. "Funny that you go on talking as if I were a child, though I'm seventeen years old. Can't one be wanting to walk around free and easy, even though one hasn't got a sweetheart? I don't intend to carry along bags like for a funeral when I go dancing tonight." She started off toward the West Stahls', but turned around for a final word.

Ulrika twisted her posy.

"These flowers have no color. There's no difference, however many you pick. Eva, do ask Linda for a few sprigs of monkshood, if you're going to the West Stahls' anyway. There are heaps beside their cottage."

"There's a mortal poison in the monkshood root," came the grandmother's voice from the steps.

"Say, Father, we ought to grow some fine big flowers too. This mignonette looks like stuff for an apron."

"Don't you go bringing no monkshood here. It's poisonous, I tell you. When I was young there was a girl got into trouble, and she chewed a monkshood root. . . ."

"Yes, yes, Gran, but try and remember it's Saturday night. You can tell that gruesome story of yours on Monday," Ulrika exclaimed.

Maria put her head out of the summer cottage, calling out:

"Ulrika, you're dressed—can't you come and take a turn at churning? The butter's so loose now with the mushroom season I can't get it to set properly."

Ulrika stood peering up the hill, and did not reply.

"Ulrika—I won't have time to change if you don't. I'm still uncombed and unwashed."

"What's the hurry for you, if I may ask?"

"Father, throw a pail of water over Ulrika, the mean pig. One's scarcely considered a human being in this house nowadays if one isn't betrothed."

"Shhh—! I'm not betrothed at all," giggled Ulrika.

"Father, Ulrika hasn't done a thing today. She didn't help getting the hay in because she was going to tidy up, and when we got home she'd only scrubbed the living room floor. It was me who had to do the floor in the bakehouse, and Mother had to start churning the butter."

"What a terrible noise you're all making this evening," Elof remarked. "You don't have enough work to do, any of you, that's the trouble." He spat into the basin and emptied its contents onto the ground.

"You should see the east bedroom, though, Father, scrubbed bright and shiny as a mirror. And the bed made up with two sheets. You'd think the parson was going to sleep there."

"Now, now, stop it, Maria," Elof said.

"Eva and me mayn't even be allowed to sleep in the west room as usual. She's moved us down into the kitchen. . . . I tell you, it's a wonder she lets Grandma keep her room."

"Oh, if you could only learn to hold your tongue, you spoiled old hag," Ulrika began, but was overcome with laughter.

"Father, they're so jealous because it's my birthday. Can't you tell them the years pass quickly and they'll soon be grown-ups too?"

"What did I tell you, there he comes, like a ghost on his black bicycle and me still standing here," Maria exclaimed, pointing up the road. At this, Ulrika began running back and forth, snatching the cleaning rags from her grandmother,

tidying away the basin and the soap barrel which her father had used, grabbing the towel from him and twittering:

"Oh, my, now he's coming and I'm not ready, and I was going to put the flowers in the . . ."

"You've nothing to worry about," Maria began, "you've changed and you're like a real lady, while I'm standing here like a kitchen maid."

"Yes, but it's not you he's come to look at."

"The butter's not ready and I've forgotten to chill the buttermilk. Ulrika—can't you at least haul me up a pail of cold water . . . !"

"No, I can't, he mustn't see me; now he'll soon be at the crossroads. Oh, Father, do hurry . . ." The girls swarmed into the bakehouse.

Elof went across to the well, hauled up some buckets of water and stood for some time with his back turned. The guest must be allowed to get into the yard and be alone for a few moments while he changed his mood—from one of traveling to one of arrival. To stare from a window at somebody coming to the farm, or to go forward immediately and speak to him, would be impertinent.

The visitor, a tall, well-built lad with thick hair and a broad mustache, put his bicycle against the wall. A casual glance showed him amply built in every way. Only on looking very closely was it possible to notice a meager area in his face: the bridge of his nose and his cheek bones were feeble, as if there had been an unexpected shortage of suitable bone after the completion of forehead and chin.

The boy's name was Karl.

Elof, at last arriving with his pails, said good evening and added that he was only taking them to the small cottage but he was almost scared of doing so, because there was a wasp's nest of girls there.

Karl laughed.

Ida came bustling from the potato patch, her hands grimy with earth, and offered him her wrist in greeting. He was to make himself at home, she said; it wouldn't be long before the potatoes were cooked, and they could have something to eat. Where was Ulrika anyhow, she asked.

"Ulrika's been as chirpy as a sparrow all day, but now it's evening, she's maybe feeling shy."

Karl laughed again.

From her seat on the steps, the old grandmother muttered something inaudible.

Elof came out of the cottage and suggested that he and Karl go and have a look at the barley.

The two men went off into the fields. As they walked along Elof absent-mindedly picked up a stone and threw it onto the stone wall which divided his lands from the West Stahls'.

"In a week's time, likely enough, the crop will be ready to cut," he said, chewing a kernel of barley. "Then we can get it sheaved in good time before Saint Louisa's day—she's a cold one usually, is Louisa."

Beside the potato patch there was a kitchen garden with beetroot, onions and currant bushes.

"The women have started spreading about so much finery and unnecessary stuff, there'll soon be no room for corn or potatoes and the things one needs," said Elof. "They quite take command over a lone man."

The younger man blushed across the flat cheekbones, wondering if he dared regard the farmer's joke as an acceptance of the proposal which Ulrika had taken upon herself to present to her father through Ida.

Elof took him further across the fields, talking about the quality of the soil, ditching, and degrees of tendency to frost. He showed him a clearing, half of which had been entirely

freed from roots and tree stumps. It had the poorest soil imaginable, but Elof looked at it with pride.

"I'd thought of sowing green forage here, later on," he said.

"It wouldn't take long to dig up the rest of this patch—if there was two of us," he went on.

The men looked at each other for a second, gray eyes against brown, like a plow against the soil.

"That's a walloping big stump you've dug up there, on your own," Karl said.

"Aye, he was troublesome enough. But that time I had good help from the horse."

THEY sat down to table in the kitchen of the winter cottage, which was kept clean and free of flies in summer. The grandmother sat by herself on the hay stool with her plate on her knee, and a glass of buttermilk on the wood-box beside her. Now and again the girls went across to her, serving her with what she wanted, and mopping up what she had spilled.

Each had a lump of butter on his plate, and Maria kept slipping in excuses about its not being her fault that nobody could see that the pats of butter were supposed to represent chickens. The butter was so soft now in the mushroom season she couldn't form even the smallest figure out of it. If only she'd had a little help earlier she would have had time to chill a lump and they'd really have seen something. But now it was too late, though she knew it was embarrassing to have such monstrosities for butter chickens on a Saturday night.

Nobody listened either to Maria's reproaches or to Ida's assurances. "The main thing for me," Ida said, "is that my daughters should be happy. Somehow or other, there'll be bread enough on the table, that's what I always say."

The younger girls looked at Karl and envied Ulrika, who was twenty and had a sweetheart.

Ulrika sat beside him, her eyes dim, and longed for the next part of the evening, when he would take her to the dance

on the handle bars of his bicycle. She would be between his arms and they would not be able to see each other, and there would be indifferent things to say about the bicycle and the road and perhaps he would wobble so that she became dizzy and then they would laugh at that. Later they would dance and—thank Heaven for the August twilight—soon one didn't need to laugh any more, soon the wonderful moment would come when one didn't have to be tortured by shyness. And later one would not need any other people; later one only wanted to be alone with the Only One.

At table, the atmosphere was awkward, being neither gay nor solemn, and therefore they suddenly heard what the old grandmother was squeaking in her corner.

"Ulrika, watch the way he eats before you climb into the bridal bed with him."

The young man blushed and Ulrika hurried across to hush the old woman, whispering that times were different now.

"Don't you believe it—in that way times will never be different. If I only had the good eyes I used to have, I would tell you exactly what kind of a bridegroom you'll be getting. If I could only see the way he eats . . ."

"Grandma, can't you be quiet," said Ulrika, close to tears.

"Well, well—you've all tried out being young, but you haven't tried out being old," her grandmother retorted, sucking pieces of bread dipped in buttermilk.

"Shall we go and take a look at the sideboard in the front room?" said Elof to Karl.

When they came back again they looked at the flock of women with shiny eyes, two kindly fellows warmed by their Saturday drink, who were able to be lenient with female subtleties.

"So you're going to be off dancing again this evening?" said Elof.

"But, Father, it's the last dance this year. Linda said so."

"Aye, there's been great goings on at the neighbors' since that girl got an accordion."

"Lucky for us somebody arranges something in this village," said Maria.

"If it wasn't for Linda, we'd probably never have danced a single step in our youth," said Eva.

"If the young ones did enough work, they'd manage without having to dance," Elof declared. The others laughed at him.

"You're so old-fashioned, Father, I can't imagine how you ever got married," Maria said. "How did it happen?"

"Ida went dancing and I stood and watched," Elof replied.

"But somebody else might have taken Mother instead. Weren't you ever afraid of that?"

"Never. I knew it was me she wanted."

This piece of boasting from such a reserved man as Elof put everyone in high spirits. Ulrika gazed at her father through a rose-colored mist.

"Aye, I'll say I used to think you might have learned to dance—you weren't a reader," Ida exclaimed. "But I'm the kind of person who sets more store by the heart, in any case. Indeed, I always have. But in those days young people weren't as free to choose as they are now, believe me. My father was so terribly strict he'd say to Mother, when there was talk of proposals, 'Has the fellow got anything, or is he just some kind of trash?' But when he heard I'd be coming to the oldest farmstead in Ecksträsk he thought it good enough."

"Aye, they could be mighty dumbheaded, too, some of the old folks. Used to ask more about what a fellow had than how he could work. Let's take another look at the sideboard, Karl," said Elof.

The meager area in Karl's face had paled during Ida's speech, and as they went into the front room she remembered that

this suitor was a lumberman and a farm hand who would not inherit any farm.

Ulrika had turned a deep scarlet, and Ida muttered that people ought not to be so touchy and that both Ulrika and Karl knew very well that she thought him a capital prospective son-in-law. She had just happened to remember what things had been like when she herself was a young betrothed girl.

"Maybe, but you surely don't need to say everything you think," Ulrika scolded in a whisper.

Ida got up from the table and went across to the north window, seeking ways of changing the subject.

"They're beginning to come down the hill now—with lanterns and milk cans and bundles. It's a queer thing to see folks crowding like that to Old Farm, as lonely as that place has been," she said.

The men came back from the front room and the suitor seemed to have recovered his spirits.

"Aye, you wonder what old Adam at the west farm would have said if he had seen that daughter of his turn expert at the accordion. I remember once, just after he had been converted, a fellow came round the farms playing the fiddle. But Egron wouldn't have it—he dared him to play a single note on his farm, and sent him packing, yelling 'Bellcow of Satan' after him as he went off."

"You can't imagine what a good player Linda is," said Eva.

"At Midsummer, when there was dancing in the Church village, several of the people there competed in playing," said Maria, "and Linda was the only girl and she was best. Everyone said so."

"What does Hanna think about all this dance business?" Elof asked.

"Hanna—surely you know that Hanna's more the daughter there than Linda. Don't you know what Hanna's like?" Ida replied, sending him a look of reminder.

The meal was now over, and the girls started clearing away.

Elof walked about, muttering to himself. Then he took a pinch of snuff and offered one to Karl, who said no thank you.

"Is it my eldest daughter you're scared of?" Elof asked.

Ulrika smiled at her father, noting how cleverly he wrapped his sympathy in a teasing phrase.

Elof began talking about the dance again.

"It's not that I have anything against her playing. These young people that don't do enough work have to get rid of their energy in some way. That's all right. And I don't believe the soul takes any injury that way. But it's how she mimics folk—that's what I don't like."

"But, Father, Linda's so funny you can die laughing," Maria said.

"I'm sure of that. You can see at prayers, on Sunday, what people have been at Linda's performances the night before. Ant Viktor's only to pick up his book of homilies, an' none of them can keep a straight face."

"But she doesn't mean any harm. She can't help it that she's so good at mimicking."

"No, maybe she can't. It's just, to my way of thinking, there should only be one of each kind. Ant Viktor's the way he is, and Elof down the hill's the way he is, and every human being has a way of his own. That's how it should be, that's natural. But somebody who flies round like a squall and can act like she was almost a whole congregation in a single person, that's not natural. In any case, it feels kind o' wrong, somehow."

Suddenly the blind old woman spoke up:

"She's descended from a branch of the Lapps, you know. Old Stahl's first wife was a Swede, and that's the branch you stem from, Elof. There's a difference. But Kajsa, the Lapp . . ."

Elof interrupted her, ashamed at this support.

"Kajsa the Lapp was a splendid old woman. A good worker and decent to her stepchildren and splendid in every way," he said, sending a brown jet of spittle into the reindeer lichen on the bottom of the spittoon.

"But she was a Lapp, just the same," the old woman said.

STABLE lanterns had been hung up in the eight corners of the barn, and some daylight still slipped in through the door and a small window. But the dancers could have done without any light as long as Linda kept on playing. Their lives had been starved of music and they hungered for melodies. Linda stood on a chair, tall, straight and fair, in a blue-and-white striped skirt and a white blouse, and the accordion glittered and flashed.

Linda, they thought, was above them in every respect; nobody else had such gifts and advantages. Imagine having a whole farm at one's disposal and a nice mamma who kept at a distance of three miles on a Saturday night. And owning an instrument and being able to play it so that the senses of the audience were at her disposal. Her music dissolved all opposition—who could be bothered to keep alive the old suspicion about Simon's innocence when Linda played so that all one wanted to do was dance, body and soul.

And yet her music on this particular evening was fiercer than usual and she did not give herself time to embroider on her themes, more often taking short cuts through the tunes. Now and then she would insert harsh barks where one expected the sweetest harmonies; at other times she would squeeze out the whine of desire so that the dancers felt catlike and became embarrassed soon after when they noticed this themselves. She could skip a single bar so that they trod on

each other's toes and became confused and awkward. There was something irritated in her playing as if she were no longer content to guide their steps in the accustomed figures.

Why wasn't Linda content—she who was the most powerful of them all?

But she was not one of a couple.

This was the last dance that summer and nothing had happened. Everyone had clamored as usual about how well she played and how capital it was of her to arrange these three-penny dances; and how envious the young people in other villages were who had no accordion player nor any such octagonal barn they could use nor bicycles enough so that they could get to the Stahls' as often as they wished. They had poured bucketfuls of praise over her, but nobody had come to her in secret to say, "I like you, Linda."

She had watched other girls blossom and wilt, and blossom again in new attachments. From her post on the chair she could see everything that went on in their hearts—those in love were flushed and ridiculous, and infinitely enviable!

Soon the summer would be over and the barley due to be reaped and wrists scratched by the chaff, and there was no Boaz in the village to whom a Ruth, hungry for love, could go.

Both Sven Ahl and Leander behaved as though they would gladly come forward as suitors if she gave them a sign, keeping close to her and not dancing with others. But they were wrong in all sorts of ways, and particularly by being so slavish in their attendance. All the village boys were wrong. It had to be a stranger. But the few outsiders who turned up danced with other girls to Linda's music.

She was sick of supplying the music; she wanted to join in and compete like an ordinary girl for the favors of the desirable boys.

There was one! Handsome, with hair that stood out in

truculent bangs on each side of his head. He might have done. But he belonged to Ulrika, though how *she* had managed to snap him up at some church festival, goodness only knew.

There was a kind of glow about Ulrika, now that she was dancing with him. But she was, in fact, nothing special to look at, small and round with tawny hair. Yet this trivial appearance was preferred to Linda's proud bearing and rosy, fair coloring. No wonder Ulrika kept the boy to herself. She had never given Linda any confidences about him, not even told her his name, though they had been to many dances together. The accordion was going to turn Linda into an old maid—that would be the recompense she'd get for playing so well.

They stopped dancing for a while and went out into the moonlight and became melancholy, and then walked to the winter cottage and felt at home again.

Viktoria and Sofia were standing there, making waffles so that the air was blue with smoke. A big kettle of coffee was purring on the stove, and life was so pleasant that . . . The girls ran about with plates and cups, while the boys each took out a threepenny piece and everyone tried to say something witty.

For most of them, a threepenny bit was all the cash they had, yet they were niggardly with it in the same way as they had seen important people be, who pretended they must haggle in order to amuse the less important.

The poor played at being poor, and laughed at themselves and the faraway rich in the same breath.

Fortified by coffee, waffles and innocuous joking, they now wanted Linda to do her imitations. She told them she couldn't possibly, that they were only making fun of her, that people got angry when they heard about it, and anyway she didn't know how. But all this was part of the game, and everyone pleaded and pulled at her; and so they went off to the barn,

making a lot of noise on the way to prevent the moon and the dew from overwhelming them with stillness.

Now the barn door was shut and the stable lanterns were arranged on the floor in a semi-circle within which Linda was to stand. The others crowded together on a few boards outside the ring of light.

"Linda, do Jonas and Manda!"

"Linda, act Pers Simon when he found the Right One!"

"Linda, preach like Ant Viktor!"

"The moon is like an indefatigable serving wench who fetches water and moistens the earth," Linda intoned. And they all laughed, and said it was just like Ant Viktor, and please let them see more of him.

The chair was her sole prop, and she sat down on it, creating the rest for their imagination by her movements—the stick he propped against the table, and the book of homilies he slowly opened, his spectacles, watch chain and beard.

She imitated his way of stopping abruptly in mid-sentence, either to stare at some member of the congregation or to embroider on the text. She reproduced his voice with a kind of echo. It was as if one were listening to village prayers through a wall, with only the name Zaccheus coming out clearly.

Then she pushed up her imaginary spectacles on her forehead and explained to the uninitiated:

"Zaccheus was so undersized, the Bible says. Perhaps he had had rickets in childhood, and had spindly legs as a result. But he was crafty, was Zaccheus, tiny Zaccheus, and he climbed up a fig pine. From this we can deduce that Zaccheus was as cunning as a serpent, in spite of his spindly legs."

Linda pulled down her spectacles again and continued her thunderous muttering while the others laughed.

Then she looked up again, fixing Sven Ahl with Ant Vik-

tor's eyes, so that he grew confused, and the others laughed all the louder.

She shut the book, and passed on by degrees to take off members of the congregation coming out on the porch, gossiping soundlessly, tying their kerchiefs under their chins, putting their hats on, arranging a shoelace, picking up a child and holding it out to urinate behind a wall, with anxious glances lest anyone should be looking, and blowing the nose of an older child.

The young people said in loud whispers:

"Now she's Beda . . ."

"Look at that neck, the way she's stretching it out, that's Ahl . . ."

"D'you see her bottom waddling when she walks, just like Tekla's . . .?"

"Now she's Concordia, she's holding out her elbows just like you." For the spectators did not always escape being mimicked.

There was laughter and applause, and everybody was on Linda's side; they expected pleasure only from her.

At that moment, she stung them. Sitting down, with her foot on an imaginary cradle rocker, she began bellowing forth a malicious cradle song which a settler's wife, a hundred years ago, had composed for her Swedish child, and which some old woman or other Linda was visiting had happened to remember while lulling a grandchild to sleep.

*The old, old Lapp, he trundles
His big sack far and wide,
And every child that whimpers
He stuffs it down inside.
He drags them to his Lapp hut
And sets them, two by two,*

*And there an old Lapp Witchwife
Beats them black and blue.*

Now she let the old women of the village shriek like a flock of evil hens, all chasing the wretched chick, Linda, with her drop of Lapp blood. She mocked and grumbled that this cradle song had never stopped branding Linda. And she pulled out old women from one farm after another, not sparing even the most pious, making each sing a line of the song, and going back to the beginning when there were not enough verses to go around.

Thus Linda composed a song of atrocious persecution against herself.

Her embarrassed audience had to lie in its own way; laughing loudly, they all protested how unbelievably stupid the old people had been, implying that they themselves, from their earliest years, had been enlightened and warmhearted, and loved the Lapps—whom they had never seen—and that they had never, never called Linda a Lapp calf.

After this song, which had cost them such an effort to appreciate, they all longed for something gentler.

“Come on, Linda, give us Pers Simon and the girl from Stockholm.”

And Linda showed them how the watchmaker sat among his clocks, how his mother Agusta grumbled, how the young schoolmistress arrived and was the Right One and how she got a big belly, and how Agusta scolded and how Simon and Margareta went along arm in arm, as if they weren't walking through Ecksträsk at all but on some nobleman's driveway. When Linda got to the bit showing how they walked together, she first proffered her right arm and then her left, taking a quick step to the side and changing her bearing, so that everybody could see at once when she was Pers Simon and when

Margareta, but when she mimicked their speaking solemnly together, listening and nodding, the spectators stopped short in the midst of their laughter.

They saw Margareta's head dreamily inclined toward Pers Simon, and, though her maidenish absurdity was emphasized, they had to admit that Pers Simon's wait had had its reward, and they sighed, wishing "the Right One would come along for me, and take me out of my misery. . . ."

They all thought about love, and not at all about Linda.

Later, they became embarrassed, sitting there gaping as though they were at prayers instead of at a dance. During the long winter, one would need a phrase like that, for memory to feed on, "Remember that last dance at the West Stahls'—it was such fun—believe it or not, I laughed without stopping from the minute I got there until the minute I left."

And they demanded to be shown Jonas and Manda, for nothing was so diverting as to hear Manda scolding Jonas, through Linda. There was no risk of any solemnity creeping into that.

Manda, and Jonas, the Fox, were regarded as the village Bad Lot.

When the villagers listened to the text, "For it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!" their thoughts went to Jonas and Manda. And when the girls were to be taught womanly virtues, Manda was held up as a warning example.

"What do you mean sitting in the window, staring at folk like Manda?" And the old Lapp in the cradle song, whom nobody had ever seen, was gradually replaced by the real Jonas.

At the words, "If you go on being naughty, the Fox'll come and stuff you into his sack," frolicking children became stiff with virtue. Jonas often used to go about in the evening with

a sack on his back, looking for wood, or stray hens, or anything he could pick up in the village outhouses.

He and Manda had nothing but a hut on the hill, and a cow, but they had so much to quarrel about they never really got down to work. There was something else, too, connected with Jonas and the cow, which made Manda refuse to have anything to do with the animal. She would not drink the milk of that "sin-ridden creature," she would say when she went round the farms, begging for a sip of Christian cow's milk.

The villagers did not willingly give work to such people; the only thing one could let them do was to slaughter cows and sheep.

And now, instead of spinning out some typical quarrel between Jonas and Manda, which she could do so amusingly, Linda displayed the grim side of their lives.

Through Linda they saw Manda, tall, slovenly and ungainly, come shivering along on an autumn morning; they saw her turn and say something to the grinning Jonas, saw them come in and speak to farmers, and saw Manda's looks and expressions which seemed to wander all the time, and her slippery figure which seemed to be continuously on the glide. Every sentence she spoke denied the previous one; each gesture contained an appeal—believe me this time, this is what I really mean, all I said just now was untrue. They could see her body, on which the flesh itself seemed to lie loosely under the skin. One would think she had neither muscles nor nerves like an ordinary human being, but was made of some kind of insensitive stuff, like porridge or toadstools.

The horror was that as Linda impersonated her it became impossible to hope that Manda was made of anything but human flesh and blood.

She lifted an arm and examined the knife, measured its length with her eye and frowned, lifting her other hand to

feel the imaginary blade, and saying, in Manda's greasy, nasal voice, "Knife's so blunt, I'll like as not never draw no blood out of the critter!"

Linda crouched down and became little Jonas, standing grinning behind Manda, holding a pail and a whisk. Then she straightened up again, and started once more, a whining, cruel complaint about the blunt knife. The listeners could sense the stench of an autumn morning when the earth is more dead than dry wood, and an animal is carried, apprehensive and trembling, out into the yard. . . .

Yet, in the midst of their disgust with Manda, they knew both the desire to be and the dread of actually being Manda. Linda laid bare a spot in them which felt akin to the evasive, gliding Manda. They got a glimpse of the price of loose living and this consciousness became a kind of shared guilt. They could no longer judge Manda without judging themselves. And they were so entangled in Manda's fate that pity became a necessity and lost all its sweetness.

But they fought themselves free, leaving Linda still there, and looking at her from the outside. She, who could so recreate Manda that they seemed to see her soul, must not she be more closely related to Manda than they? Or was it simply that she did not realize what she was revealing when she imitated people? After all, Linda was easygoing in everyday life, and scattered careless opinions about her, like everybody else. "Jonas and Manda can't really be counted as people at all . . . those two should be shut up." What a far cry there was from the spoiled, self-important farmer's daughter to this quaking creature, standing in front of them with the sockets of her eyes brimming with deceit and anguish!

The examination of the knife went on. Then it began to search for the vein, elusively slipping away, which maintains life.

And while the spectators sat there, with bated breath, Josef's small sister, Vendla, who lisped, and was a stupid little thing, rushed forward, stood on tiptoe beside Linda, and pulled at her arm.

"Don't do it—let it stay alive, let the calf keep its shoulder!"

Linda came to, and tried to shake Vendla off, but the child hung on.

"I saw it so clear, it was just like when they hung up the calf—I saw its legs tightening up under your blouse, Linda. Don't do it! . . ."

Vendla began crying like the child she was, and Concordia went up and fetched her, telling her they would go home.

"Don't cry, Vendla, we're only playing. Linda's joking . . ."

But Vendla began stamping her feet, and sobbed still more violently.

"No, no, it wasn't a joke, the calf was really hanging there," she called out from the doorway.

Concordia hushed her, and dragged her off. Linda, offended and pettish, began distributing the lanterns so that they could be hung up again. She wasn't going to imitate anybody any more and play the fool when they took things in that way. Imagine beginning to blubber and talk about calves' shoulders! She hadn't forced anyone to come to the dance and had not herself been keen on doing the impersonations. It was the others who had pleaded and wheedled.

"But, Linda, it was only Vendla. You know how easily upset she is, and how squeamish—not even right in the head."

"Linda, don't be cross now. It's always such fun here," said a boy, and shivered.

"Linda, take out the accordion and give us a polka so we can dance till the sparks fly!"

NOW Linda played beautifully, drawing out soft, soothing notes and producing trills like the song of birds, and sighs of love. Nobody could think about slaughterings in the world as long as she played like that.

And so the young people danced themselves back into a happy mood.

Linda looked at Karl, Karl looked at Ulrika, and Ulrika closed her eyes.

Leander slouched along the wall with his shoulders raised, his hands fumbling in his trouser pockets, showing an anxious face. He had come to the dance without his father's permission, but he was not enjoying himself. Sven Ahl mocked him, and it was impossible for him to stay near Linda for long at a time. And Sven laughed as if he knew about Leander's shameful secret. Everyone must understand how things were with Leander when they heard Sven laugh.

Linda did not feel comfortable in Sven's vicinity either. He was broad and heedless and flabby. But his laugh had a terrifying buoyancy. It was a rough, unbridled sound, implying such independence that those who heard it were reminded of their fetters.

Sven would sometimes follow Linda to Gnome Mountain, or accompany her there and carry the accordion. Otherwise his courtship was mostly confined to tickling her with the fuzz

of laughter. He seldom attacked with words or glances. Linda sometimes felt like taunting him into seriousness or anger, penetrating through his armor of laughter to find out whether it concealed a strength or an insufficiency. But she decided he was not really worth that much curiosity. Neither Ant Leander nor Sven Ahl were worth bothering one's head about.

Just as a waltz was in full swing, Ant Viktor appeared to fetch his son. Large and authoritative in his homespun coat, he stood at the barn door, and called out in a thundering voice:

"Leander, where are you? You're to come home!"

Linda reduced the music to a whisper and the young people began dancing on their toes; but since Linda did not cease playing they did not stop. Leander edged along the wall and Linda made the accordion whine on the top notes like a whimpering puppy. Ant Viktor called his son again and Linda mockingly sounded the scolding bass, following up with a pitiful squeak. The farmer walked in among the dancers and everyone fell away before him, letting him pass unhindered, and Leander gave up edging.

"Haven't I forbidden you to go to these dances?" Ant Viktor demanded. Linda brought forth a whinny from the bellows.

The dancers whirled across the floor like spirits, pressing closer to each other to stifle their laughter. Tomorrow they would all be sitting at prayers, and it would be difficult enough then to meet Ant Viktor's eyes, without having any piece of direct impertinence to feel ashamed about.

The farmer gripped his son by the shoulder and walked him straight across the floor. When they were in front of Linda, Sven laughed. The farmer stopped and gave him a look which reduced him to silence. Leander's eyes turned to Linda, and she regretted the puppy whine and began squeezing out

the gentlest tune she could think of, sending a lullaby after the thirty-year-old boy who wasn't allowed to stay up and play.

When the farmer and his son had left, the dancing stopped for a while and the young people laughed and went out to look around.

The whole village shone in the moonlight. Like black shadows, the strict father and his son glided up the hill, reproaches echoing in a ghostly murmur across the countryside.

An owl flapped round the girls in their light dresses, and they turned to the boys for protection with affected terror, giggling and saying how awfully dreadful it was.

Then they all trooped back in again and stood along the walls, while Linda went round with her accordion on her middle, letting them beg her for tunes. Stopping close, like a sister, to Ulrika she said to the dark young man:

"Everyone's getting so tired of my tunes now, I hardly dare play them all over again. Can't you, who are a stranger, give us something new we haven't heard?"

He did not reply but took a mouth organ out of his pocket and blew an unknown little polka.

Linda extricated herself from her accordion, exclaiming that it was high time it was handled by a real musician. He played with much embroidery and many trills, never for a moment breaking the rhythm, and the dancers flew across the floor. Someone asked Linda to dance but she pretended not to hear, and he danced off with Ulrika instead. Linda looked at Karl and saw that they were almost embracing, across the accordion. For a moment she was worried that they might prefer his music to hers and then her thoughts went back to the embrace. He smiled as he played, except when he caught sight of Ulrika. He looked handsomest when he was serious.

Occasionally he gazed at Linda with a hint of challenge. It may have concerned the music or simply been a spark which had jumped out of another fire. Linda had the right to stand close to him—it was her accordion and she needed to see how he worked out the tune. When the dance was over everybody called out enthusiastically, saying how clever he was and asking him to give them one more. But he returned the instrument, moving it from his embrace to Linda's and adjusting the straps so neatly over her shoulders that she trembled.

"Play that waltz again—'Deep in the forest where the birches glow green'. . . It's capital," said Karl.

She started playing it and he danced away with Ulrika, that little pudding, who looked so graceful and dainty with sheer love. Soon the floor was filled with couples but Linda played for one being only, leaning her head on one side and closing her eyes in order to be able to listen and implore.

After a while she had to look up again, having collected enough strength to meet his eyes. But he was nowhere to be seen. The accordion gaped and moaned into silence, filled to bursting point with air, like a child at the most breathless moment of a crying fit.

THEY were happy about the darkness which concealed their eyes and grateful for the moonlight which allowed them to sense, rather than see each other.

They had forgotten their own names and who they were in everyday life, drinking their sole significance from each other.

They lay side by side, speaking with voices which burned through the stuff of the words. Sometimes they wept because of the words and the stuff, the homespun stuff, which separated them from bare skin and ecstasy.

They went over their brief story as it had unfolded up to that evening.

How strange it was that they should have met in a crowd of people at a church festival, that they should both, almost at once, have thought they must be meant for each other; and though she knew a girl shouldn't show at once that she had been attracted by a boy, she had forgotten this and shown her liking, whatever the risk; and imagine that anything as marvelous as mutual infatuation could arise quite by itself; and if other people only knew, how astonished they would be that anything so strange could happen in this world.

"That I noticed you wasn't strange, everyone notices you. But that you should notice me . . ."

"At first I only stared and wondered where I had seen you before. And after a while I saw that it was my grandmother

you were like, and then I knew I was all right. The heavenly kindness of that woman! Why did she have to die?"

"How could your mother leave you, and go off to America the way she did! I simply can't understand it. Anybody as remarkable as you."

"Why, I don't know. She told people she absolutely must get hold of my runaway father. He was more wonderful than a wet little kid, I guess."

"I'll never go to America. I won't die and leave you either, like your grandmother did," Ulrika said dreamily.

"You'd better not," he replied, pulling her hair. He wanted to do more with her, and paled across the nose; but she cooed and cuddled close to him, and his strictness protected their love.

Mignonette spread its perfume in the darkness.

To be silent was blissful, and to speak was blissful too.

Ulrika prattled about a linen weave, told him how Mother had said to Father that they would have to build a stove in the west bedroom and turn it into a kitchen and let them live upstairs for the time being, like a young married couple. Ulrika had known from Father's expression that he had nothing against it. And wasn't Mother terribly good; and Eva and Maria so jealous that . . .

"It seems that Maria is the best worker among you three," Karl said.

"How do you like Eva?"

"A nice little thing, too. She has a tiny waist, I noticed."

"Would you rather have had one of them, if you'd seen them before me?"

"Sometimes you're so childish you ought to have a doll for a sweetheart."

"But you like dancing with other girls, don't you?"

"Yes, but only because I have you."

"Funny, it's just the opposite with me," Ulrika said. "Before, I used to look around and think, this one, or that one—well, maybe. But now all the others seem so stupid and conceited, you can't imagine. I wouldn't want them to touch me with as much as a little finger."

"That's good," he said. "You're good, too. You're the best of them all."

They kissed and laughed and then began complaining.

"It's a funny thing, when you come to think of it," said Karl. "Both my uncle and aunt are as mean and sour as they make 'em. Can't scarcely say a friendly word to each other. I've seen them in bed, sometimes, lying there backside to backside, and they look just as bad-tempered asleep as awake. Imagine, Ulrika, a moonlight Saturday night like this. They're married, they've a bed of their own and can do whatever they like with each other; but they simply don't want to do anything. And you and me, though burning up with love for each other, we mustn't. It's unfair."

"We'll never lie in bed with our backsides to each other when we're married, not even if we get as old as old. It will always be just as wonderful. I'm never going to turn into a nasty old hag like that. Never, never."

"When do you think we can get married?" he asked.

"The old ones are so stupid, talking as if three or four months was a short time. They'd like us to know each for a whole year before getting married."

"Why can't they understand that things are different with us! Surely even a stone can see we're meant for each other. I'll never love anybody but you, Ulrika."

"No matter what happens, I shall love thee for ever and ever," Ulrika said solemnly, in her very best Swedish.

"Where did you get that from?" he teased, refusing to follow her transcendental flights.

"It's in a serial I'm reading just now. But anyway it's true, even if it has been in print. I shall love thee for ever, God can hear me say so, if He likes."

"Ulrika, darling, feel in my waistcoat pocket."

She found a ring there.

"You don't mean that . . ."

"I couldn't stop myself from biking down to the Church village yesterday to fetch it. I arrived so late the goldsmith had gone to bed, but I threw gravel at his window and forced him to get up and give me the ring. After all, I paid for it and ordered one for myself at the same time, but believe me, he was sore. But I just laughed and thought about this evening."

"You don't mean . . ." Ulrika said again. She sat up in the bed and gazed at the ring glowing softly in the hollow of her hand.

"Imagine. . ." she whispered.

"You can't see it now because of the dark, but the ring's engraved: *Your own Karl, 9/8, 1913.*"

"My twentieth birthday, imagine that."

"That was what I was thinking of. We'll have the same date put in my ring, though I can't afford to get it out until St. Michael's."

"Just think of our both being allowed to wear our rings! Then I'll stop being all that shy and awkward when you come. I'll run and meet you high up on the hill, and the whole village can watch as much as they like."

He put the ring on her finger.

"But it's a little too tight for you."

"No, no, that's only because I'm so warm just now."

"Why, aren't you always going to be like that?" He kissed her lingeringly, and when he let her go she twittered:

"Oh, Karl, how beautiful it is, how happy I am! If it were only St. Michael's now so I could keep the ring on always."

"Does that really make such a difference?" he said, lying down stiffly.

"But what is it—why do you sound so displeased?" she asked.

"Don't be childish, now. I'm not in the least displeased." His voice was even rougher than before.

She began to cry.

"I can't breathe if you're angry with me. I'll die if you ever leave me," she sobbed.

He clung to her as though he were in the midst of a storm and she were the only tree. He stared past her and she continued to cry.

"Why are you so far away? What are you thinking about?"

He did not answer, but groaned on her shoulder.

"You can do anything you like, if you'll only go on loving me."

He sought her underneath her clothes, nervously, as if in a dream, but her naked skin calmed him and he came to himself.

"You're a real cry-baby. Bawling like a kitchen wench in the family way. You're lying here just pretending to cry, that's what. You ought to have your bottom smacked, not being able to wait until the wedding before doing forbidden things."

The strange storm had passed; they laughed at each other, at themselves, at their having to laugh at all.

"When you're a farm hand and illegitimate, and the family is just waiting for you to behave boorishly, you have to be even more careful with yourself than a fellow who'll inherit a farm," he said.

She caressed him.

"I feel so ashamed," she whispered.

"You mustn't." He was tender again toward her.

"Yes, because everything's so unfair."

"Not any more. Not since I met you. I've stopped hating my father. I've begun to think about Elof, instead. I'd like to be the way he is when I get to be a man of fifty."

"You're to be the way you are. You're always to be the way you are."

They lay mouth to mouth, using their own words and borrowed ones about themselves, and about their fate. His name began with the letters that ended hers; he had dark hair and she was fair—everything showed that they were meant for each other. They fell into a light sleep.

Ulrika woke at the sound of a creaking door on the ground floor, and thought that it must be Eva and Maria coming in, the little girls who had yet to find a sweetheart.

"Imagine my not knowing that you could play the mouth organ and the accordion. Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Shhh! That wasn't anything to boast about, surely. Anybody can do things like that. They all have it in their fingers if they only give themselves a chance," he mumbled drowsily.

"You played so beautifully," she sighed. "A thousand times better than Linda, though she plays well, too. Would you like me better if I had a secret like that? I can't do a thing you don't know about."

There was silence.

"Your lovely bicycle, too. All of them went and touched it and asked whose it was."

She crept closer him, loath to go to sleep.

The restfulness.

The bliss of nearness.

The fear of not being worthy of the beloved, the fear of parting.

The longing for him, to incorporate him. A small Karl, who would remain in her when the big one left in the morning.

The blood smiled in the girl's veins.

To think it really was like that. How often she had seen pregnant women in the village, exhausted wives with too many children. She used to look at them with pity and terror. She herself had never wanted to get like that; yet now she desired it. And when the child was born she would soon be longing for another. She wanted always to have children in her, always to be heavy with Karl's flesh and blood. The children would suck her dry, empty her of Ulrika and fill her with Karl. And in the end his body would have taken such complete possession of her that she would simply be able to say, "I know Karl, I am he."

The eyes of the ceiling began to appear, knots of wood, shiny with resin, peering through the whitewash, gazing like human eyes, curious, smiling, warning, indifferent, all-comprehending. . . .

"You're not to stare like that . . ."

She crept close beside him, breathing in the smell of his hair and skin. She was possessive about the present, afraid that something would go to waste in the silence, thinking that perhaps time would pass more slowly if she talked.

"We'll christen the first one Karl, won't we?"

He was asleep.

"If only we could get married at Christmas, we'd be able to have a child by September of next year. We might easily. A dark, wet little thing. You must promise not to be upset if I scream. You must be quite calm and just fetch the midwife and carry in some wood, and then everything else will be all right."

He opened one eye.

"You won't catch me fetching any midwife tonight," he said. "You won't catch me carrying in any wood, either."

The joy of hearing his voice again was so overpowering that she did not even have the strength to laugh at his joke.

"I'm longing for your children," she said.

He lifted up his head and looked at her.

"I'm longing for you."

They were serious again. She clasped his head.

He gazed at her full in the face, trying to steal a picture for his memory. But his passion obscured her and her features seemed all the time to be pointing to an inner face, which was forever escaping. He pursued her until a second's temptation came over them both.

*I will kill her, so that I may see her properly
Kill me, so that I may rest in you.*

They dismissed the moment, resigning themselves to the degree of distance which is a condition of life.

Abruptly, he removed her hands and lay down with his back to her. They were still, and he was in pain.

"Maybe I'd better go," he said hoarsely. "It's soon morning."

She whimpered. Why should he go, was he angry with her?

Why couldn't he sleep beside her as he used to, and have coffee in bed with her in the morning?

"Because I don't like being a capital prospective son-in-law."

She replied with more tears.

"Cry-baby there. Ulrika, Ullika . . ."

She wept with abandonment when he started to console her.

"Girls are lucky, aren't they? Able to cry off even the small-

est pain in body or soul. Ulrika, darling, Ullika, Bullika." He made her smile.

"It's only because I think it's so wonderful, tonight. Solemn, in some way. I want to take it home with me, and not have to join in that noisy courtship coffee. I can't stand hearing myself called 'suitable,' over and over again."

She became tender, and begged for kisses. Now he wanted very badly to go.

"What shall we do about the ring?" she asked. "You're right, it really is too tight, and as you're going to the goldsmith's anyway, maybe you could take it with you and get him to widen it a little bit. Imagine, I thought we measured so carefully with the piece of thread, that day. . . ."

She chattered all the time while he was putting on his coat and trousers and pulling a comb through his hair.

"Oh, your hair, your lovely hair!" Faced with parting, her talkativeness knew no bounds.

"Karl, I can't get the ring off, it's stuck. Help me!"

He came and sat down on the corner of the bed, put her fingers in his mouth, licked round about the ring, and began biting the inside of her hand.

"Ow—you foal!"

Then he took the ring, and put it in his waistcoat pocket, saying he must be off. He walked to the door, and looked back.

On the window sill, the monkshood glowed, its blossoms dark and curly against the white curtain.

Ulrika sat up in bed, bubbling over with a new fit of playfulness which he could not share. She plucked a sprig of mignonette from the bouquet on the bedside table, and threw it to him.

"A ship comes loaded. . . !"

He caught the flower in mid-air.

KARL came down into the courtyard. The pain in his groin was so acute that he could scarcely stand upright. He whispered her name like an oath.

He looked around for the bicycle but could not find it and remembered that it must be at Linda's barn. He tried to hear if the dance was still going on, but all was quiet. He did not like having to go back.

The air was cool and he pulled up his coat collar and buried his face in it to retain the warmth which still smelled of Ulrika.

Spiders' webs were clinging to the twigs and grass straws, enveloping them in tiny veils, as delicate and strong as love.

This was nature's gray hour. When the earth is not taken up with the interplay of rich colors, the gray shadows sometimes steal forward, in gentle competition with one another.

He met two girls at the crossroads, two forgotten maidens whom nobody had asked for a dance but who were useful enough for making coffee, washing up and scrubbing the barn when the dances were over. The only way they could show their favor towards a good-looking young man was by not staring curiously at him. They smiled vacantly, to spare him the embarrassment of feeling himself observed at such a delicate moment.

But Karl was thinking of Ulrika, and did not see them.

When he arrived at the West Stahls' he went up to the

barn, where his bike had been standing. It was not there. He made his way to the main cottage, saw a faint light in the window and wondered whether Linda knew where it was. Perhaps she had gone to bed—she might even have a suitor. He cursed the bicycle, but without it he would have to face a six-mile walk. He knocked on the window pane and Linda pulled back the curtain and beckoned him in.

The outer door was unlocked. A smell of newly scrubbed floorboards mingled with the odor of stale waffle-fat and made him hungry and angry.

"Come in, Karl," Linda called out from the bedroom. Her voice made him feel like a sad younger brother who needed comforting.

He stood in the doorway, looking at her, at the long, narrow head, at the forehead and the bridge of the nose which seemed to have been chiseled out of one piece of hard bone, at the sockets of her eyes which were unmercifully deep, with only thin tissues to hold and protect the eyes. At the rose-colored eyelids, the long straight nose with its sensitive nostrils, the thin lips and large white teeth.

His glance fluttered between the hard and the fragile parts of her face. It made him feel doubly afraid, either of being hurt by her or of harming her himself.

He sought to recall Ulrika's calm round features. His teeth chattered, and he did not know what to say, because he had forgotten the errand about the bicycle.

But Linda spoke up. What luck that he had come, so that she could learn the new polka. She had tried to work it out but there was a bit in the middle she couldn't manage. But as she was in her nightdress and couldn't get up, would he please fetch the accordion from the top of the clothes chest?

Karl did not move. He heard a little boy inside him weeping

for Ulrika, he wanted to go back to her, he was in danger. And yet he had to take another look at this unknown girl and find out whether her audacity was due to sheer childishness or whether she really was depraved and impertinent. Whatever the answer, he did not like her; he was only curious and tired, and his limbs were heavy. I'll go soon, that's what I'll do, he thought. Back to Ulrika, to sleep beside her until morning, then I'll surely remember my errand. Yes, indeed, he must be going.

What golden angel's hair, falling on those powerful shoulders—what a transparent skin covering those bold features . . .

But he must be going. Her strangeness had nothing to do with him.

"Why don't you bring me the music box?" she said.

His tongue was so stiff that he could scarcely reply.

"It's so late. . . ."

She began scolding him.

"So it's too late to do me that small favor, is it? But it wasn't too late to come here and dance! *I'm* never to dance, I'm just to supply the music and slave for everyone. Afterward, you all go away and leave me alone. It's easy enough to manage without Linda Stahl on weekdays. I'm the loneliest girl in seven parishes. But just you wait; I'm going to stop playing. You, that's such a mighty good player and so mean that you won't even teach me a new tune, why don't *you* stand for the Saturday night dances in future—if there are to be any? As unfairly as I'm treated . . . just as if I was some sort of . . . air. . . ."

"Well, it wasn't me, was it, who forced you to fix up these threepenny dances?" he said truculently.

"I was only waiting for that—now I'm to listen to malicious talk because I make them pay! A whole threepenny piece each,

and sweethearts free! But even that's too expensive, robbery, I suppose. Now I have to listen to that too! Pray what sort of rights does a girl have, when she hasn't got a father and nobody's done her the honor of choosing her for a sweetheart?"

Linda sat up in bed screaming out her grievances. She was magnificent and healthy and furious.

Karl looked her straight in the eye, and said:

"Wait until you're chosen."

It sounded like an echo from the children's treats of their childhood, "Wait until you're offered one."

"How remarkable it must be to be a man. Able to go round as he likes, picking and choosing and rejecting. . . !"

"When you find the right one, well, it's wonderful, of course," he said. And it was not until he had given this ingenuous answer that he realized the scorn in her words, and was ashamed of his simplicity and grew angry again. What was he doing, standing there arguing with a girl who did not matter, surrendering himself and losing! He might have been sleeping beside Ulrika now. Or might he not? He grew hot, his penis hurt, he tried to think about Ulrika, but the rank lust he was feeling now had little in common with the delicious fury he felt when he was with Ulrika.

"Why don't you stay with the right one, then—if you've found her?"

He gave a shudder of hate and lasciviousness. It was all like a shameful dream.

"Or perhaps you've made a mistake?"

For a moment her ironical expression and tone of voice gave way to uncertain hope.

He did not reply.

"Then why have you come here?" she stormed. "Disturbing a girl alone in the middle of the night like this."

At that moment he remembered the bicycle, and asked about it.

"So that was yours, was it? Yes, there was a bike standing here after all the others had gone, and I put it in the stable doorway, so it wouldn't get lost."

He turned to go, feeling pain at every step. He felt heavy and raw. When he reached the kitchen, she said, with a small, girlish giggle:

"The stable door's locked."

He had to turn back again. By now he was so ungainly that every moment was a humiliation.

"Where's the key, then?" he ground out.

"Search for it!" she said.

And he lost control. The three little words danced in his head like a swarm of burning, sweet sparks. Blind lust belched through him, sweeping out everything in him that was individual. He hurled himself at her, and she was full of the joy of battle, wrestling with him, and laughing. Even when he lay on top of her, imprisoning both her wrists over her forehead, she continued to egg him on with her "Search for it!" She was as wanton as only a virgin can be.

And so he took from her her maidenhood, her laughter, and her lightness of spirit.

She wept with pain, but he did not notice. He was out on loan to other forces than consideration or self-interest. A condemned father clamored in his blood, with the plea: understand me, stand up for me, revoke your judgment.

THE sun rose and a beam touched the flame of the candle, making it pale.

He remembered Ulrika; she was the first fragment of his disintegrated self to return to him. Then he remembered himself and received himself back, a mere rag. Not daring to look at the girl, he got up and arranged his clothes with his back to her. He had nothing to say to her. The silence between them was that of two thieves who had stolen a treasure and lost it. He flung her a sulky glance.

She lay on the bed, an ordinary girl with a long, narrow face, as paltry as a candle in the morning sun.

He stood with his back toward her, preparing himself for an outburst from her. There was a long silence and then she said, at last:

"I was only joking. . . ."

He still had no words.

"It's your own fault then." She wanted it to sound like pure scorn but disappointment made her voice thick. "It's your own fault, you who've found the right girl."

"What shall I do?" he said, feeling cold.

"Nothing. There's no need to do a thing. Anyone who likes can go along and rape a fatherless girl and do nothing about it. As long as he looks after his own legal sweetheart."

At the word "rape" his face turned crimson. He was afraid

of her, afraid of himself and of some other storm which might take possession of him and cost her something more precious than her maidenhood. For safety's sake, he said nothing.

"Maybe you think I want you?" she said in the midst of tears. "A lout like you!" Her upper lip stretched down over her teeth.

Now the Village Whisper was awake, clamoring and condemning. Was he an animal or a human being? What right had she had to tempt another's sweetheart? What kind of home did he think he could build, who was unable to contain his instincts in a lawful furrow? What sort of love could she hope for who was now a defiled maid?

They were under the authority of the Village Whisper. The laws and liberty of animals were not valid for them. They listened to the Whisper and suffered under its verdict and defended themselves by putting the blame on each other.

"It was your fault—!" they shouted. Then they were silent.

An afterwash from the violent swell of ecstasy broke over him, an inner caress which he would have liked to pass on to her. His unjustifiable tenderness made him feel tearful and he pitied himself with a soft extravagance which almost included her. A flash of revelation that she, too, had been tricked. Wiping away a tear trickling down his nose, he said:

"Aye, it's a bad business, this."

"A bad business. That's all right for you to say," she howled.

And so they hammered on each other with the words which were available to them at this impossible moment.

"Go away. I never want to see you again," she said.

"That's mutual," he replied.

But the more they tried to hurt each other, the more miserable they became. And though they were unable to console

each other they continued being together, because they could not endure their own company, and had no other human being to turn to.

In the end, she turned her face to the wall to rest for a moment from the pitiable quarrel, and he took the opportunity to go out.

The stable door was shut with a latch. He stood still, staring at the chunk of wood, pointed at it and half-whispered, half-hissed:

"This shall be my evidence. She said 'locked,' she did! 'The stable door is locked,' she said. But anyone can see it's only latched. Like the stable door at Uncle's. Like every blasted stable door in this country. But now no bike's going to be fetched on the sly. I'll go and get Ulrika. She shall come with me and be my witness that Linda was lying. 'I was only joking!' That's no excuse. You don't joke about things like that. You don't say a stable door is locked when it's only latched. Ulrika must see this." He turned and walked off with his eyes rigidly fixed on Old Farm. He had to find Ulrika and tell her that he still was Karl. She could kill him if she liked, but he must be with her.

"I will tell her everything," he said. "I'll deny it. I'll never admit it as long as I live. I'll go there and wake Elof. I'll go to her father and show him the ring. Elof, he's on my side. 'She's a damned bellcow,' he said. It's him I'll talk to. I'll let him see what's engraved in the ring—*Your Karl, the ninth day of the eighth month, nineteen hundred and thirteen*, that's what it says. Engraved in gold for eternity."

It took him hours to get halfway; every step of the road had to be paved with evidence that he had walked uprightly.

He stood beside a heap of stones, digging for the ring in his waistcoat pocket. And as he stood there, tearing out the whole

lining of his waistcoat in his frantic search, he saw Ida bustle out onto the porch of the summer cottage with a trayload of cakes and coffee. Karl threw himself down on Elof's field and watched her walk across the courtyard toward the winter cottage.

There, on the top floor, lay his sweetheart, Ulrika. She had the best room at Old Farm this summer, because she possessed a suitor. An accepted suitor. He, Karl, was the suitor. And here he was lying in Elof's ripening field like a thirsty tramp, like that greedy dog, Esau, watching the good-humoredly masterful Ida waddle across the courtyard, with courtship coffee. He remembered his words, spoken a short time, no, a whole lifetime ago: "It's not always one can truthfully be called suitable."

He saw Ida knocking and making a noise on the porch door of the winter cottage, and reflected on how tactful of her it was not to steal in. And then he thought about Ulrika.

He rushed along the field, down to the woods, away from the village, running and weeping and calling Ulrika's name.

FAR down in the grove where the birch had glowed green it was now yellow and ugly and cold.

Autumn always arrived as a disappointment. The pelt of summer was pulled off so fast, one scarcely had time to get used to the warmth before it was gone. People had to put on the longhair pelt, and even though some, like Ida, had lined the leathery side with a red covering, it was a desolate day, indeed, when it was brought forth.

Oh, the sorrow deep down in the grove in the lives of two women.

Where Ulrika wandered from window to window, her hair and senses ruffled in imploring expectation of her beloved.

Where Linda fought like a man, lifting sacks of potatoes and barley, slouching round uncombed and bitter, waiting for her menstrual blood. But the suitor never arrived, and at night, the two who waited were so small where they lay, each in her lonely corner.

Ulrika's suitor had disappeared and the village chuckled at Ida. For that was what might happen when one was too keen to catch a son-in-law, and boasted too loudly about one's lack of prejudice against an unknown stripling of a farm hand. The girl was to be pitied; she was harmless and easily taken in. But Ida had certainly had a lesson and ought to be less eager in the future with her prospective sons-in-law. Though there

was no doubt that this one had been an odd fellow. There were people who could swear they had seen him lurking in the woods below the village, as furtive as a criminal.

When this rumor reached Old Farm, Ulrika took to wandering in the woods and scouting around and calling, until her father finally went after her and fetched her home—only to go back himself, when darkness fell, and scout around in the same manner. One couldn't say that the suitor had been dismissed, could one? Things went so far that Elof, when driving down to the mill, once made a detour to the farm of Karl's uncle, in order to make inquiries. He was told that the lad had run away and that they heard rumors that he was on his way to America. But not a line or a word of explanation from Karl himself.

Ulrika wept, and found no comfort in Ida's indignation against that scoundrel and blackguard who had tricked them into thinking so much of him, but who would certainly get his just punishment some day, Ulrika could be sure of that. Ulrika screamed terrible things against her good mother, saying that she did not understand anything, that she had spoiled it all by running about with coffee on Sunday mornings and that Karl, who was a sensitive person, had not been able to stand being called suitable all the time.

Oh, well, she would get over it, thought Ida, and accepted Ulrika's accusations, murmuring, crestfallen, that times had certainly changed if young fellows were so touchy now that they could not stand being treated to coffee.

Ulrika was drawn to the other mourner down the hill. The two of them met whenever they could, and arranged to work together, baking bread, doing the autumn washing and picking lingonberries. Each propped her own troubles against the other's and they got themselves through the day in a common

bond of silence. In the evening they had to meet again. They were dead tired but simply had to talk.

"But why didn't he come back, if he loved me?" Ulrika said.

"It's incomprehensible," was Linda's reply.

"But couldn't he at least have said something?"

"You'd have thought that was the least thing. He might have prepared you with a word or two. . . ."

"But maybe he'll write from America, when he gets there?"

"You'll see, he'll suddenly change and understand what trouble he's made. And then he'll write."

"Did you know—his name was Karl."

"*Your own Karl, 9/8, 1913,*" was engraved on a gold ring which Linda wore on a piece of string underneath her blouse.

"Last night I dreamed about him. He was crying. And there was something so pitiful about his nose and cheeks. He looked at me but didn't say anything. Why did things have to turn out like that?"

Ulrika began to cry.

"Why, indeed." And Linda joined in the weeping. They both cried for a long time. In the end Ulrika said:

"Imagine your bothering like this about how things are for me. At home they think I ought to forget about him, but, you see, you can't forget someone who's meant for you. Because Karl was meant for me, I know that. I have his word for it."

"How lucky you are having someone to mourn for," said Linda.

"It's easy for you, who don't know what it is, to say that," Ulrika replied, blowing her nose but proud of the advantage of knowing what it was.

The tearful meetings nearly always followed the same pattern. Ulrika would tell her story, ask questions, make accusa-

tions and try to convince, as though Linda possessed the secret of how everything had changed and had the power to recall the loved one. But Linda had nothing except the secret. And so they cried until they parted, worn out, and somehow comforted for the moment.

One morning, however, her loss swept over Ulrika so uncontrollably that she yelled to her mother that she would hang herself if Karl did not return.

"Now, girl, surely it's time you pulled yourself together. Things could have been much worse. Suppose you'd been with child, that would have been something to wail about."

"I'd far rather have been with child," Ulrika shrieked.

"You talk as if you'd lost your senses. Look at Linda. She's no waist any more and I'll wager the wench is in the family way. And she hasn't even got a suitor. You—you're altogether better off. Free to do as you like and take anyone you want."

"But there's only one who was meant for me. And if I'd at least been going to have a child, I'd have had something left, wouldn't I? The fathead I was, not to have forced him . . . not to have . . . Oh, if it had only been now, I'd never have let him go, I'd have . . . yes, I would!"

Then Ida was silent, and regretted all the thoughtless chatter about happiness and bread on the table—the result was that her daughter did not realize what it meant to support offspring, but thought that feelings were all that mattered in the world.

"You oughtn't to meet that girl Linda so much."

"Linda's the only one who understands me. Linda is all I have," Ulrika howled.

"I'd say she has always tried to take everything away from you! Just think of that rose kerchief."

"But it was Simon who stole that. And that was when we were all small. Why dig that up now?"

The disagreement about Linda quenched Ulrika's outburst, and the two women were silent. Then Ida said, in a curious voice:

"Who do you think is the father of Linda's child?"

Ulrika snapped back.

"How you and all the other mothers go around imagining things. As if Linda wouldn't tell me if it was that way." And, after a pause:

"If she were in the family way, I mean. We talk about everything. Why does everyone always try to pick at Linda?"

But now the tearful meetings came, almost unnoticeably, to include Linda's troubles, too.

"If you were to have a child, what would you call it?" she asked one day.

"Karl, of course," Ulrika answered. "I can imagine so clearly what he would look like, the little thing."

"What name do you think I ought to choose, if I had a child?" said Linda.

"Well, of course, I know no lovely name except Karl."

"Imagine, I dreamed last night that I had a child. It was a boy, and he lay on my arm, all pink and dainty and I was so happy. And the midwife and Mamma and Aunt Ida were there, and the midwife said now I'd have to tell them who the father was. And then I grew so miserable and answered there was none, and it was true, because however hard I tried, I couldn't remember. And the midwife said they wouldn't be mad at me at all, if only I told who it was. But there wasn't anyone. Then she got terribly mad and after that the child wasn't fun any more, and I woke up. I thought, then, that that's how it must have been for the Virgin Mary. Wasn't it a queer dream?"

"It was indeed. Oh, how I would love to have a child," Ulrika said.

"If I have one in real life, I'll give it to you," Linda said.

"But you have to be married to have one."

"What if you and I were to get married."

"Yes, imagine that!"

They began to giggle and blush.

"Then I'd be the husband," said Linda.

At this, Ulrika's giggling mood vanished.

"There's only one who can ever be husband to me! Oh, why doesn't he come! Why has he gone to America?"

"Yes, why in the world did he want to go off to America? And leave everything in a muddle behind him!"

Linda began a quarrel for Ulrika, and walked round the kitchen ranting about Karl the Deceiver and about all men's propensity for deceit.

"Take their pleasure and then disappear. Skim the cream and leave the blue milk for those who follow. Eat their cake and have it . . . as true as Amen in church!"

Ulrika sat nodding agreement.

"Be thankful you're rid of him, I tell you."

But this roused Ulrika again.

"You're not to say that! It doesn't matter what he was like. I only saw the perfections in him, but even if he'd been real bad, I'd have wanted him anyway. You're never to say it was a good thing he went away!"

"All right, all right. But it wouldn't have hurt if he'd had a bit of character," Linda rounded off.

"Oh, only a little. He hadn't needed to have specially much at all. Just enough to have kept him here, down the hill."

Their friendship became frenzied; they were the only ones who understood how incredible was the situation in which they found themselves.

The chosen one who, without ado, had assumed all the rights

of her position and who was being deprived of all proof of it as the days went by.

Her heart said: He loves me, he told me the truest truth when he said, "Then I knew that I was all right."

Time and the air replied: He lied. If he loved you, he would long as you do for him and come to you.

Ulrika: I am meant for him.

Time, doubtfully: But if so . . . then why?

Her heart consoled: He loves me.

THE pregnant one who was even less beloved than Leah.

A child lay growing in Linda's womb, taking its nourishment and filling her, without asking permission. And she herself lived in the village, obliged in the same way by all the powers to take her place in it, and suck up its opinions, and fill its thoughts and byways with her fate.

There were days when Ulrika could not bear to see anyone; and days when no shame on earth could keep Linda from pursuing the Village Whisper. She had to go on, to weep, to continue fighting with every means at her disposal for something so infinitesimal, namely that they should not forget her.

She would complain, cautiously, in one of the farmhouses, that Sven Ahl used to be so attentive in the old days, but that now this time was past, and if she hadn't been a fatherless child she would never have been so stupid as to encourage him so strongly. On other farms she would speak about her sorrow that Leander no longer found his way to the Stahls'. Ant Viktor's house must clearly be too high up on the hill for the memory of the girl in the valley to be able to live there.

When these whisperings reached Ahl, he told his son that if that was the way things were, he would turn him out of the house and not let him inherit as much as a calf, he could be sure of that.

The same evening, his son put on a clean shirt, trimmed his mustache, skied down to Linda, and sat down and laughed.

Linda looked flattered, and admired him so ingenuously that the lad was enticed into showing himself without laughing. He looked at her with serious desire, went across to her and made as if to seize her. Glowing with fury, she scratched him and pulled his ears, as if she were striking back at the whole village.

"So that's what you thought, is it? Linda Stahl's been dishonored, so you don't have to be all that fussy about her now. But that's just where you made a mistake.' "

He tried to retreat into his habitual laughter, but all he could achieve were shrill squeaks which gave him no protection. He had lived so securely with his single trick that he was helpless when it no longer worked.

He made his escape with bleeding cheeks. It was cold and he had forgotten his cap. He banged on the door and begged for his otterskin cap. Linda had fastened the latch.

"You can fetch it in court!" she said.

Another evening, Leander turned up. He just came in and sat down, scraggy and gloomy as usual. From time to time he looked across at Linda with a vague appeal in his eyes and, although she was unable to interpret it, she felt a passing sense of fellowship with him.

"You look as miserable as if *you* were expecting," she said good-humoredly.

"I'm not that lucky," he answered, and left.

The villagers had a few good laughs at Sven Ahl whose face had been scratched by a witch and at Ant Viktor's Leander who, at thirty, was still spanked by his father. But these little jokes could not permanently improve Linda's position. She was not chosen by anybody and therefore nobody wanted to see her.

What good had Ulrika done, she stormed to herself, that she was allowed to have her dream—what evil had there been

in Linda's longing for love that she should be punished with such an ugly reality? One evening she made up her mind that she was going to tell. That very evening she would take her revenge.

When she came home from the field Ulrika was there on a visit. She was sitting by the stove sewing while Hanna worked at the loom.

Linda took a long time getting her outdoor clothes off. She just stood there, thinking out questions. Have you never wondered who the father is? Or: Haven't you ever suspected that Karl might have been unfaithful? Or: What would you say if you were told that . . . ?

She went in and sat down on the hay stool, leaned her head against the wall and looked down at Ulrika, who was crouching on Linda's old baby chair. So helpless and innocent she looked, so confident that people around her would show her kindness.

"Would you like to see what I'm making," said Ulrika, holding out a baby's shirt.

"If little Karl comes along we must have something to put on him, mustn't we?" she whispered, making childish grimaces of conspiracy. Hanna could hardly hear and surely there was no danger of a piece of common sense dropping from a chink in the ceiling to spoil the game, for only Linda and Ulrika knew what this talk about little Karl meant. There was something insidious about Ulrika's way of pretending that the pregnancy was a game. But Linda was not going to be content any more with the cloying, unreal friendship with Ulrika. All that was necessary was one short sentence; and then that affectedly smiling mouth would be distorted, the dreamy eyes would awaken, and the doll's prattle come to an end. And they would hate each other openly.

Just a few small words and the whole world would be transformed.

She could be silent, too, if she wished. It would be enough simply to unbutton her blouse and show the ring which hung there on the string, chafing her. She shut her eyes while Ulrika continued babbling about shirts and lace and stomachers.

At that moment the child moved inside Linda. She experienced a joy beyond what was permitted and what was forbidden; it was like an offer of reconciliation with the whole world. She forgot the humiliations of the day, forgot all the evil one could do with words, and listened with her entire body to the playful kicks. She could not keep herself from laughing and had to communicate it to Ulrika.

"Feel here, you'll see how funny it is."

She took Ulrika's hand and laid it on her belly.

"Oh, oh—he's kicking my hand," said Ulrika. She leaned forward and put her cheek against Linda's belly. From time to time she looked up, panting, and whispered:

"Imagine, he's really knocking in there. Does it hurt?"

"No, it feels funny."

"Just think of there being room for him . . ."

The girls looked at each other, in gentle excitement at the wonder of pregnancy. Ulrika stroked Linda's belly with awe.

A short respite from all circumstance. But not for long, for memory drove them back into loneliness and shame and their eyes filled with tears. They had to look away. Ulrika resumed her confused prattle and the tendons in Linda's throat grew taut.

IT WAS light but there were no clouds to be seen; snow seemed to be falling straight out of the air and the ground had no firmness. Courageous people clung to the knowledge that there were other seasons and climates and said that heaven and earth surely would right themselves and show themselves to the living again.

Linda lacked the energy to go out in the village in such weather. She just stood in the window of the front room watching the sweep of the snow. Time, for her, had ceased to move in any direction; the clock strayed between a quarter to eleven and ten minutes past four. She was in the seventh month, and it seemed forever.

Very occasionally, in the whirling March dream, mail day arrived. Then Ulrika came, plodding through the snowdrifts, and her bag was empty in the seventh month as ever, and she would say the same things, over and over again.

But there would be a certain tension when the girl approached the crossroads—and a triumph for Linda when Ulrika came to her instead of going home to her mother—it served Ida right, standing there in her kitchen window grudging Linda everything.

Ulrika gave the newspaper to Hanna and then the girls shut themselves in the front room while Ulrika lamented and wept. She described her beloved, his beauty, his love, sketch-

ing him in Linda's mind with her words—"Help me to remember him so that he isn't wasted."

And Linda greedily received Ulrika's creation as a firmer basis for hate than the shadowy figure she herself possessed.

On weekdays she often forgot to hate this boy whose name she hadn't even known until he had gone, and she found the ring beneath a crushed sprig of mignonette. What had happened was too insignificant to be regarded as the cause of this immense seventh month. A stupid boy with whom she had talked for a quarter of an hour and wrestled with as if they had been a couple of ten-year-olds. Surely that could not be sufficient to give rise to an entirely new human being!

She was glad that Ulrika came and magnified him so that he grew more worthy of hatred.

When Ulrika left, Linda took the newspaper from her mother and read the unchanging March news about war threats and national defense and the demonstrations of the suffragettes in England.

One mail day she discovered a square hole in the paper and plied her mother with questions about what had been printed there. Hanna clattered with the weaving shuttles, saying there was nothing special about the cutting, it was an advertisement for Victoria wool which she had wanted to send for, and an announcement of the death of a remote relation whose name she had forgotten. Unluckily for Hanna, the usual advertisement for Victoria wool appeared elsewhere in the paper, and Linda found it and showed Hanna; and the obituaries were all in their customary place far from the empty square, yet Hanna persisted in saying that there had been nothing in it.

This led to a new reproach to add to those against the mother who, by her neglect in enlightening her daughter about the dangers of life, had plunged her into this intolerable

seventh month. Linda was determined to know what her mother had cut out of the paper, and hold her responsible for it.

She went to Old Farm and asked for a loan of the paper, telling Ulrika to come and have a look, and the girls sat down on the sofa and read with blazing cheeks:

“PREGNANT GIRL HANGS HERSELF . . .

“ . . . was found to be in the sixth or seventh month of pregnancy . . . could not endure having been deserted by the man in whom she had placed her trust . . . preferred death to the shame of life without honor. . . .”

“I’ll make Mother sorry for this,” Linda said, while Ulrika pored over the text like an old woman over a passage in the Bible.

And Linda went home and took Hanna to task.

“So that’s what you go around hoping for. But I’m not going to hang myself. . . . I’ll go on living, just you wait and see. . . .”

Then Hanna turned her gaze on her daughter, giving her the look of a full-grown woman who despised all talk of Victoria wool and all lies about deaths.

Linda avoided her mother’s eyes and said a sulky “forgive me.”

Even a small concession like this from Linda, and Hanna’s love would resume its expressions of servility. Everything was going to be fine, she said, they would help each other and it would be such fun with a baby and once it was born nobody would think at all badly of Linda any more. . . .

“But Linda, couldn’t you try and tell me . . . I haven’t wanted to ask . . . don’t you want to confide . . . just in me . . . and say who it was, who . . . ?”

In a flash of wickedness, Linda replied:

"Simon, of course. Who else?"

She broke into violent sobs and Hanna came across to her and stroked her hair.

"Mamma, do you never think about Simon?"

Her mother's hand trembled.

"You know I've never been one that thinks a lot. It's only you I ever really think about, you and the cows and the house."

"Do you believe this is my punishment for betraying Simon?"

"Linda, don't take that word in your mouth. Don't think such thoughts. The things that happen to us are trials, not punishments."

"But if one single person knows who you really are—and that one person fails you, how can you go on living after that?"

"Oh, Linda, who is it that's hurt you so?"

"It's not me, I mean Simon."

"It was my fault," Hanna said in a low voice. "I thought it best for you and him to be parted. After all, you were only a child . . . I wanted to take care of you . . ."

"You ought to have let me go to the Elofs' that night, when I wanted to. You really ought. But by then, the worst thing of all had happened, anyway. He'd been whipped already by then."

"Mamma, have you ever felt guilty?" Linda began again, after a pause.

"You know well enough we're all poor, sinful creatures . . ."

"I don't know anything of the kind. I don't feel a bit like a poor, sinful creature in that way. I mean guilty of some special thing."

Hanna grew anxious.

"It's a hard memory you're touching on. I hope you'll never

have to live through times like those. It happened in the famine of '67, when I was twelve or thirteen years old. We ate bark or anything we could pick up. But the little ones couldn't digest that sort of food. All that year was one long wail of sorrow. Four of my small brothers and sisters died; and it took such a long time. And they had such eyes when they looked at you. When you've heard sounds like that and seen eyes like that, looking straight into your soul, then you can't feel anything but poor and sinful and very small."

"Do you still think about those times?"

"I always used to think about them, right up until you were born. I was always ashamed deep down because I was allowed to go on living when the little ones had to die. I went on turning over in my thoughts whether the food was fairly divided and whether the little ones should not have been given all the milk, what there was of it, since they couldn't stand the coarse stuff we ate. But when you were born, I stopped thinking that way—I felt then that God had had to save me, so you could be born."

Linda was so used to hearing her mother say things that could easily be dismissed, that now the older woman's seriousness disrupted her rebelliousness.

"But all that happened so long ago and it was something you couldn't help. You were only a twelve-year-old child then . . ."

She stopped herself.

"I meant some other, more exact thing. The famine year was a natural catastrophe, it wasn't your fault . . ."

"Something after that? Oh, I dare say there have been things, mostly thoughts, maybe. Maybe I was hard on Stahl. But that was because I felt that he was hard on you when you were small. And there were times when I behaved foolishly with

you. There's things to regret all right—if you start thinking.”

“But you never think about Simon?”

“Not really . . .”

“How strange that you, who're so sensitive in one way, didn't see what he was really like. That's the awful thing.” She fell silent as if she realized that this tragic fact could not be altered by reproaches.

But she soon had to attack again, tramping back and forth across the floor in a fit of boastful fury.

“Because I'm not the right person at all to see things like that. I was like a murderess when I was six years old. . . . I couldn't even be trusted with a chicken. . . . I've been hopeless always . . . what could you expect from a person like me . . . !”

“Aye, it's not easy being a human being,” Hanna sighed.

“So that's what you say now,” Linda retorted. “Why was it so wonderful to bring me into the world then, if there's no pleasure in being here?”

Hanna decided that it was time to go to the barn to give the cows their midday feed.

UNLIKE her mother, Linda found no certain refuge in her work. She would weave or spin in violent jerks and, in between, wander from window to window, thinking about people and about her place in other people's thoughts.

The farms of the village had a lifeless appearance. Neither Ant Viktor's nor Jonas' house at the top of the hill exuded the respective prosperity and destitution of everyday. There were no windows shining and no eyes in the windows, and the drab light stole the essence from snow and human skin. To be on the lookout for adventure on a day like this required a stubbornness of which Linda alone was capable. And while she stood there, inventing a significant part for herself in the story, a man came skiing down the hill, no knight, no Boaz from the Book of Ruth, but a real live villager. Linda hoped so strongly that he would come to her that she began to love him, and because of the pure pleasure she felt at his coming down the whole slope and right up to their cottage, she could not bring herself to be angry when it turned out to be only Leander. He could not help being only himself, she thought, and showed herself gracious and gentle toward him. On such a desolate day the simplest village idiot was a wonder of Creation.

Moreover, Leander was not so foolish as usual. He said:
"Sometimes I feel as if I was going off my head."

Linda put the coffeepot on the fire and asked what *he* might have to complain about, who wasn't expecting.

"The thing is, I'm wondering whether you'd think of marrying me?" he said.

"What on earth's come into your head now?" Linda giggled.

"The thing is, I had another taste of the old man's stick today. It made me so goddam mad I made up my mind I'll not take any more of it."

"Why did he beat you today?"

"I was standing out in the stable, swearing, and he heard me."

"What were you swearing about?"

"Nothing special. But when all your life you've had to listen to what a terrible sin swearing is, you believe in the end it must be something that makes you feel real good. I've took to swearing a mighty lot these last few years."

"Does it make you feel good, then?"

"In the beginning it seemed like it could help," Leander replied gloomily. "Anyway, this time the old man heard me. And he was so goddam mad that . . ."

"Did you let him have it back?"

"No, but I made him sore in another way," Leander reddened and found it difficult to go on.

"I said it was me that . . . it was me that got you in trouble . . . that I'm the father of the child."

Linda laughed in wild delight.

"You don't say. And what did Uncle Viktor say to that?"

"I didn't stop to listen. I just ran off saying I was going down to propose to you, and stepped onto my skis, and took the stick and pushed off down the hill. And here I am."

This was certainly an adventure. Now this March would never be the same again.

The continuation of Leander's proposal was meager enough, but nevertheless a proposal.

"I haven't all that much to offer, I guess. But I'm healthy and fit for work, and you could do with a man about the place too. I've been hired here often enough to know that."

Linda asked him to sit down at the table and poured out coffee for both of them. She felt cheered by the visit and knew that Hanna would be pleased. There were times when she wished to give her mother pleasure.

"Do you like me?" she asked.

"Sure I do," he replied, quickly averting his eyes and sighing like an old horse, so lonesomely.

He dipped a rusk in his coffee and sucked at it greedily but without enjoyment, his head bowed over the cup, looking up at every mouthful as if suspecting that someone would take it away from him. For a long time they said nothing, while the March snow swirled against the window in futile gusts and people watched the cold sleet and thought about how many inanimate things there were among them.

"I suppose you could get a better suitor," Leander said gloomily.

"A girl like me doesn't fetch much on the marriage market," Linda answered with bitter encouragement.

"Don't say that. After a while no one would think any the worse of you about the child. And you've got a farm, too," Leander continued. In the midst of these snowdrifts, the word farm sounded good. It tasted of homespun cloth, a hearth, crops, home, ancestors, attention.

Leander topped off his praise with a compliment: "And you've certainly got grand looks. . . ." Still he kept his eyes stubbornly averted.

Linda admired his courage; it was no joke to sit there and propose in such a posture and in such a light. She accepted

everything with a benevolent expression, but did not exactly say yes.

"I'm afraid I haven't as much to offer as other suitors," he said, sighing his trembling horse sigh again.

"But I'll be good to your child, I guarantee that," he concluded.

When her mother came in, Linda told her that now she would have to make preparations for a wedding, for a suitor had arrived. Hanna and Leander looked at each other in deep embarrassment. Linda scattered words about her as carelessly as if she did not know their meaning. Hanna mumbled a welcome to the house and Leander's eyes gave back melancholy thanks. He was now sitting by the door again, leaning forward, with his arms loosely hanging in front of him. Linda bustled about the kitchen in great excitement.

"Who'd have thought we'd ever have such grand company down here at the bottom of the hill? A place that's looked down on so much."

She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, and began to exclaim how tousled and unkempt she looked.

"You're not to stand in the kitchen if you're going to do your hair," Hanna said to her, aside, as severely as she was able.

Linda went into the front room and unbraided her long pigtail. But again and again she had something to say, and then she pushed her head round the door and let her hair tumble down. When at last she was ready and came in, she had combed a high crown of hair above her forehead and the strange light of evening glowed in her skin. She felt beautiful and moved with dignity.

At this moment Leander's father arrived, a man who had always been accustomed to authority and who, having once stood before Majesty in a Farmers' Delegation, had become even more awe-inspiring to the village.

Leander, who sat by the door, did not look up. Hanna began busying herself with the coffee-making and mumbled words about rare guests. Linda was standing in the middle of the floor, tall and slender, leaning slightly backward. She had narrow hips and was shallow and lacked the secret depths of body which enables women of motherly build to carry their offspring invisibly, right up to the seventh month.

Hanna asked Ant Viktor please to come in and sit down.

He did come forward, but without sitting down. He remained on his feet, his eyes fixed, with the reflected glow of majesty, on Linda, who was standing in the middle of the kitchen.

She was now confronted by a man more imbued with the Village Whisper than anyone else she knew. She gazed at his homespun coat, his beard, and his watch chain made of hair; Ant Viktor was a widower. And at his stick. She had betrayed Simon for the sake of the Village Whisper, and it was Ant Viktor who had induced her to commit that evil deed. Now he was going to receive his punishment.

The old man looked at the girl with the expression of superior amusement which was his prerogative. But when Linda assumed the same expression, as if they had something in common to be pleased about, he let his anger become visible in his face, and said:

"There's little modesty about you, Linda Stahl!"

She was happy and breathless and did not lower her gaze.

"No, it seems as if I hadn't that gift. Is there anything else I can offer you instead?"

Then he stopped smiling, and began speaking in a low, thunderous voice. Hanna stood by the stove, sobbing.

"Linda, think what you are saying. Antonsson, dear, don't listen to her."

"Now I've wasted enough time on you, my girl. I've come to fetch my son Leander home for the last time." Leander's chair creaked.

"I'm afraid that won't do," Linda said. "Leander's going to get married and if I've heard rightly, it's said that when a man takes a wife he's to leave his father and his mother and cleave unto his wife."

Now the amusement was entirely on Linda's side and the old man looked frightening. He took a step toward her.

"You've counted on trapping Leander, but then you don't know his father."

"Leander's proposed to me himself and he's of age."

Ant Viktor lifted his stick. But Linda laid one hand on her stomach and held up the other in pious deprecation.

"You ought to be flogged!" he exclaimed.

"Think of your grandchild," Linda answered.

Hanna said something which nobody heard and the old man turned to Leander.

"You'd better come outside with me, lad, so I can have a talk with you."

Leander sat still without saying a word, hanging his head.

"There's no need for Leander to go out. From today on this house is Leander's home and Leander is master here. He's not to be ordered out of it if he doesn't want to go himself."

The father placed his stick on his son's shoulder, pressing it down in such a manner that Leander had to sit up, but the latter still refused to raise his eyes.

"You're to come outside. I want to speak to you."

Linda went across and placed herself between the men and thrust the old man's stick aside so that it bounced against the door post. Then she sat down on her trembling suitor's knee, and concealed him like a figurehead on a ship.

"Leander's not going out now. There'll be no more flogging on this farm. If you want to talk to Leander, Uncle Viktor, you can do it here in the kitchen, without a stick."

Ant Viktor had ruled so long without opposition he was now at a loss. A quarrel of this kind belonged to the days of his youth before the strength of the participants had been established once and for all. He stood for a while, hesitating. Not that he couldn't use foul language; he had merry Luther's permission for that; but only on condition that he wasn't contradicted. How could he bandy words with a girl who did not have the least respect for his age and who did not seem to realize that he had once stood in the presence of Majesty!

"Leander, answer me! Have you proposed to that girl?"

"Yes," came a faint voice, from behind the back of "that girl."

"Is it you who's the father of her child?"

Then Leander stretched out his hands, laying them protectively round the girl's stomach, and peeped from under her arm, saying triumphantly:

"Yes, that's right, it's me."

"I'll disinherit you," his father said. "And you'll not put your foot in my house again," he added. He reached for the doorhandle, his stick trembling in his hand and his entire body trembling.

"Disinherit! That's mostly a way of speaking. Eight children on a farm that's just big enough to share between two. Leander won't be losing a great piece of land," said Linda.

Ant Viktor raised the stick once more but Linda lifted her hand again, exclaiming:

"Go in peace!"

The old man flushed and said:

"You can blaspheme, you . . . ! But just wait. One day you'll be made to feel the power of the Word!"

LINDA was as wild as a cat at twilight. She lit a fire in the porch bedroom and began putting things in order there—now there was to be an end to using this room as a dump for everything which ought really to be kept in the attic or the larder. Away with clothes, wool basket and bread bins, for this was to be a suitor's chamber. She kept on talking and giving orders. Hanna and Leander were made to lift all the heavy things and then she swept the floor and finally scrubbed it, getting down on all fours and chattering all the time. Now at long last these walls would be papered too, and she was going to make new curtains and put them up at once.

"If you hadn't come with that heartening proposal of yours, I would never have had the strength to scrub this floor," she said, drying the threshold, and got up breathlessly.

But then she suddenly noticed Leander standing by the north window and shaking his fist after his father and the adventurous mood vanished. She went across to the window and looked out. It had stopped snowing and the sun's after-thoughts were spreading a dark light across the sky as a reminder of its existence. And it was as severe as "Thy Holy Temple" and Linda remembered what a girl had once said in a snowstorm.

The old man dragged himself along with extreme difficulty, but nothing prevented the Lord, when Ant Viktor had finally

reached the top of the hill, from opening His blue temple and saying, "Enter, Ant Viktor, and sit down on this soft cloud which has been specially carded from the whitest lambs' wool for the elect to rest on; and tell Abraham, Isaac, Egron Stahl and Me how you have been getting on recently." And although it would have been gratifying for Ant Viktor to have begun with the King's greeting, he was so incensed that he started by complaining about how Linda down the hill had abused him. And Egron grinned triumphantly and said, "What did I tell you," and all the patriarchs agreed that they had never heard the like. "But hasn't she ever been taught My Word?" God inquired. "Yes, indeed, I've read it to her often enough, but she is completely disobedient," Ant Viktor replied; and Egron nodded assent.

Linda stood at the window, thinking about Ant Viktor's Sunday voice. The patriarchs would never believe her if she told them how much she had loved that voice, and that her shrieks at the village prayers in her childhood had really been uncontrollable efforts to achieve the same pitch as he. "The Lord is in His Holy Temple—He is also in the voice of Ant Viktor." There had been one being who had understood Linda's reverence, a reverence which her father and all the patriarchs called blasphemy—but that one and only one had been burned up in the fire on a spring evening. And since then there had been less and less reverence and more and more revenge in her blasphemy.

If only she were not always having to defend herself, how happy she would be. But there was Simon.

Leander stood there, taken up with his hate, in which she had no part. If only the entire story of the proposal had been a prank at the barn on a summer evening. She shivered and put some more wood on the fire.

"You won't change your mind, will you?" Leander asked, leaving the window and coming after her. "It's quite sure that you'll say I'm the child's father?" Linda shivered again and said yes.

"In front of the midwife and the parson?"

"Yes."

"In front of Hanna and my brothers?"

"Yes."

"In front of everyone?"

"It'll be shameful for you, too, you'll soon find that out."

"I'm not scared."

Oh, if only a fatherless, handsome man had spoken such noble words to her! She knelt in front of the fire, looking at him as he stood with one foot on the threshold and the other in the front room, without leaning against the door post. He was round shouldered and saw nothing to lean against.

"How did it happen that you proposed to me, of all people?" she asked.

His face was dark and weatherbeaten, except for the upper part of the forehead, which was white. It looked as if he had two kinds of skin. Now, when he was blushing, this was most apparent in the pale part of the forehead which grew pink. A streak of innocence, delicate as a flower, humiliated. He put one hand in his pocket, panted heavily and said at last:

"Would you have wanted me if you hadn't been in trouble, too?"

Linda felt guilty relief at the word "*too*." It indicated that he did not want her for herself but for some special reason of his own.

He remained standing there with the pink halo round his thick-skinned features. He did not resemble Simon, yet she was reminded of him. She got up and said:

“There’s a decent streak in me, too, although nobody thinks so. I promise to be as nice to you as I can.”

Swaying in front of him for a second, she wondered if she should stroke him across the head. But his eyes warded off her caress.

TIME and again Linda made up her mind to be kind to Leander. He was as frankly calculating as she was, and ought to be rewarded with kindness. She was so tired of being the only one with a shameful secret. Leander could be her brother; she was going to be kind to him. And, furthermore, he had the advantage of not wanting to pet or play about with her. In the long run, that would have been a strain on her good resolutions.

The best way of showing her benevolence was to devote herself entirely to the part of the forgiving sweetheart. She would murmur submissively, "My betrothed has said," and "My sweetheart thinks." She got up early every morning, dressed herself neatly and gracefully, was industrious at her work and respectful in speech and behavior.

And her forgiveness was allowed to show through, as a reminder to her surroundings of the crime committed against her before she became betrothed.

Leander played up to her as the suitor who, late in the day, had thought fit to do his duty, however heavy. He helped Hanna in the barn, and began to busy himself with some of the things which had been neglected since Stahl's death. In the evenings he sat carving a stand for winding wool on, which he was going to give Linda as a sweetheart's gift.

Linda did not introduce delicate subjects any more, but calmed him with talk of everyday matters, saying they ought

soon to be thinking of getting a horse, instead of always borrowing one from Elof or Josef, and suggesting that it would be a good thing to clear some of the woodland over at Gnome Mountain. Then they might buy a reaping machine and decorate the attic and get a broadcloth suit for Leander, and the whole of the West Stahls' would turn into a real farm. But Leander was the person to make all the decisions, of course.

"Doesn't it feel good to become the master of a farm which so badly needs a man to run it?" Linda asked.

Leander replied in the affirmative, with the gravity of someone who knows the responsibility of ruling. His eldest brother, who was fifty, and unmarried, had once been left in charge of their home for a whole week, while Ant Viktor was away seeing the King.

Hanna listened surreptitiously to the young couple. What a good thing that Linda was beginning to take an interest in domestic duties; what a good thing that life sometimes offered a moment of peace.

One day, one of Ant Viktor's many stay-at-home sons came over to say that Leander would have to go back, because his father had had a stroke, and Leander must be sensible and not disgrace the name of Ant by not coming to the sickbed.

Leander answered that he had been forbidden to enter his father's house again, and that he did not intend to intrude now, and Linda showed her loyalty as a sweetheart by saying that Leander was needed where he was. And the brother could witness how Leander, who had always been the bullied little one up the hill, went swaggering round as master at the West Stahls'.

A few days later, Aunt Tyra came over, in a small sleigh which she drove herself. Leander was out in the courtyard clearing away snow when his old aunt arrived and she remained in the sleigh while she spoke to him.

Linda stood in the window, watching the meeting, and thinking out a description of it.

"And I watched the old woman sitting there, arguing and trying to persuade my sweetheart to desert me. She went on talking for a long while, in that bass voice of hers. And I saw so clearly that she only wanted to butt in and throw mud at me. For the old people don't ever wish the young ones any happiness. But Leander's not one to sway to and fro, he gave her a taste or two of the truth, and in the end she got some real respect for my betrothed."

"Good day, Leander."

(Oh, my joy, my darling, my pain.)

"Good day to you."

(I am not frightened of you, I don't like you. I don't see anything either absurd or venerable in you.)

"They say you're getting married."

(If it only were to a decent girl.)

"Yes. The way I've messed things up."

(That's what you get for all your nosing into my secrets, and all your plans that I should end up an old bachelor like yourself.)

"I've brought along a chest with things for you."

(None of your brothers and sisters will get an outfit like you. Ever since I first noticed your affliction, I have sewed and saved, and put aside all the best for you.)

"It isn't exactly a destitute house I'm coming to!"

(If there's one thing I'll never thank you for, it's all your favoritism toward me. From the beginning, you made my brothers and sisters envy and despise me.)

"But you surely need a horse to take with you to your new home! I have some savings here in a purse, that I'd thought

you could use for a horse, and driving harness, if you need it."

(Don't you see that I want things to turn out well for you?)

"If you're as well off as that, I don't need to be asked twice."

(A horse makes his master a man. Driving a horse turns you into a man. It's a woman's job to look after the cattle; a man and his horse belong together.)

"Leander—I hope you're building your home on a basis of confidence?"

(Oh, Leander, if I could only speak openly, if you weren't so hard on me, if you only hated me a little less than I deserve.)

"I should say so. She knows I come from a family that's used to the rule of the stick!"

(None of the other boys was ever beaten like I was. When I was younger, they blamed things on me and let me take the beatings and laughed. "Go to Aunt Tyra," they said, "she'll put catskin in the seat of your trousers, just like she lined your fly with muslin. Your dickie's the most tender thing she knows.")

"Now your father's dying, Leander. He can't lift a finger against you any more. You must let bygones be bygones."

(After all, my brother did not know about your suffering. Nobody did except us two, not even your mother. She had so many small ones to look after, and was delicate to the end of her days. She never noticed that I handled you with special care, and nursed you myself all through your childhood.)

"We've decided that the children in this house won't have to put up with either beatings or pity."

(That's for you, Father and Aunt, a jab at both of you in the same sentence!)

"I'm glad you have good resolutions. It is bitter to grow old remembering what one has failed to do for a child."

(Oh, Leander, you don't know about the moments of

anguish I used to go through seeing your child's penis, so damp and red. Hearing your cries of pain. Haven't I stood, hundreds, no thousands of times, bending over you as you lay there, naked, holding a razor blade or scissors, ready to make the incision. I reeled off all the Bible verses I knew about circumcision, aloud. For me, during those years, the Bible dealt with nothing but the circumcision of boys. I used to think: "tomorrow will do, it's so red and tender today, my hands are so coarse, my instrument not clean enough, perhaps he'll get blood poisoning if I start cutting." And the following day I would think: "It looks better today. He'll grow out of it. All boys are a little tight there when they are small." Another time: "He'll be awakened by the pain. What am I to do with the blood. He'll see the knife, he'll think I wanted to kill him. He'll hate me forever because of the pain of the incision." Then I made a decision again, sent up prayers to the Almighty: "Today, in an hour's time, in a little while." And suddenly you were too big, I couldn't grasp that you had grown so big so quickly. And your pain grew with you, you suffered, and your eyes haunted me, day and night.)

"The worst thing of all is not to leave a child in peace."

(I'll never forgive you for helping me and discovering my shame. I'll never forgive you for the time when I was fourteen and lay screaming over a tub of tepid water, and you kept running around with your ointments.)

"No, the worst thing of all is not to give help in time."

(Why, oh, why did I hesitate, when you were only two years old, and the tender flap of skin no bigger than a frozen lingonberry!)

"Is there anything more you want?"

(I don't want to go on talking to you.)

"Leander, for the last time, I beg you to go to the doctor."

(When it was too late for me the other battle commenced—to get you to see a doctor.)

“Why? I haven’t had a stroke.”

(I warn you, Aunt Tyra. I have forbidden you to mention the doctor. It’s enough that one human being knows about my degradation.)

“Why do you hate me so, Leander?”

(Will you never forgive my love?)

“Can’t you leave me alone?”

(I hate you because you love my suffering. You’d have pulled my ears and scolded me like any other confirmand, if I didn’t have my pain. Your love for me has grown together with my foreskin.)

“If that is all you want—to be left in peace—why are you getting married?”

(And to that spoiled hussy, Linda. What will she be able to understand about your suffering? I alone understand what you’ve been through.)

“Linda isn’t inquisitive. She respects me!”

(Do you really believe I intend to confide my sorrow to her! To a woman! That I’d p^resent her with my affliction, and have it accepted! No, indeed. It’s not to be accepted, it’s to be cursed, as long as I live. It’s not her love I want but her hate.)

“Leander, don’t be proud.”

(Your suffering isn’t anything to be ashamed of, but it’s nothing to glory in either. Why don’t you want to be cured?)

“I am what I want to be.”

(It’s too late, I know nothing about the world outside my pain. All my thoughts are concentrated on this thorn in my flesh. I can attract people’s attention to my secret, and divert their suspicions. What would I do with my life if I didn’t have this game?)

"Why must you play for such high stakes?"

(You aren't the only person in the world with a secret deformity.)

"Now you gave yourself away all right. You think a man like me ought to be ashamed and hide himself away in a rat hole. Did you ever tell my father to humble himself?"

(No, you didn't. A man who's begotten eight children has all the rights. Even if he were to break the backbone of one of them, it doesn't matter, it's only proof of manhood, courage and boldness, I suppose. If he goes on begetting until the woman dies, that's just God's Will. Everything can be forgiven a good breeder. But a man who can't beget children, neither man nor woman will forgive him; he's the scum of the earth; no crime can be compared with his.)

"We come of a stiff-necked family, my brother and I. I won't defend him for having beaten you so often, but you were the most difficult of all his children, you can't deny that."

(If you would only have allowed me to tell him about your burden, he wouldn't have touched you, I know that.)

"In a way I like the old man."

(As a matter of fact, he had the right to beat me. I remember him stealing round the rooms at night, eavesdropping to find out if any of us boys were indulging in the sin of youth, and I gave myself away by moaning with pain, and because of that I had to get out of bed and receive a beating. If I'd been capable of completing that heavenly sin, I'd have gone for the old devil and taken his stick and beaten him black and blue. But as it was, I couldn't. And he was really within his rights. Entirely within his rights. And now he's finished. I'll have to find someone else—I'll always find someone else who will help me to hate myself.)

"Leander—don't be so proud. . . ."

LINDA made such a fuss about the betrothal into which she had tumbled, that Ulrika felt herself doubly deserted. It looked as though Linda did not need her friendship any longer. Ulrika was obliged to weep alone, and Linda rattled the coffee-roaster and comforted her with unfeeling cheerfulness and with "Leander says." Just as though Karl were an ordinary sweetheart, or as if Leander could even be named in the same breath with Karl! There was something so humiliating in the idea, that Ulrika began to detest Leander, and grieved that Linda should have lost all sense of judgment. And Linda was never solemn for a moment in her waiting for Baby Karl; she was indeed so brisk that her friend never again dared to put her hand on her stomach, or ask if she might listen. Linda had become as self-sufficient as if Ulrika had never taken part in the dreams about the child.

Ulrika thought of harsh things to say in the name of friendship and expectation, but when the two girls actually met, the right to chastise was no longer on her side. It was Linda who had to be pacified.

The betrothed couple went off to arrange for the banns to be published, and spent all Aunt Tyra's money and came home with a horse and a small sleigh and a harness decked with sleighbells which brought the children out on the porch steps of their homes. Linda greeted people graciously to left and right, and told Leander that it served the old women right

to be so overwhelmed that they had to crouch behind the curtains and plant prophecies, such as "pride goes before a fall," and other words of wisdom, in their flowerpots.

Ulrika had come over to see Hanna and remind Linda of her existence by means of a present, an unnecessary object which Linda might value more than the baby clothes. Ulrika had made a doll, a jaunty figure wearing a suit and a cravat, with a mustache and hair of black wool. She thought Linda might find it amusing and change into a gentler mood and also be more careful. For all the fuss about the betrothal did not do either Ulrika or the Expectation of Baby Karl any good.

The couple drove up with ringing sleighbells and Linda was helped out of the sleigh by Leander, her arms full of her belly and rolls of wallpaper; the porch room was going to be papered as a dining room. She was rosy and happy, and angry with the parson, and said that he would certainly not see a trace of them until she was slender again.

She filled the whole kitchen with stories of how she had enraged the spectators in the church square with her glances and words and Aunt Tyra's money, so that the doll boy had become quite unimportant even for Ulrika by the time she had the chance of presenting it. Then Linda laughed her breathless sweetheart's laugh and, saying "my dear," in the same voice as the parson, exclaimed:

"But my dear child, he looks just like your suitor! What am I to do with him?"

Then Ulrika took the doll back and went home, mumbling and weeping on her way.

"She's lying, that Lapp calf! She's not happy at all!"

"She's not a real sweetheart at all. It's Leander who teaches her to lie. It's all Leander's fault."

She showed the doll to her mother and sisters, and asked

them if they thought it resembled anyone in particular. And Ida looked at Maria as if to say, has our Ulrika lost her wits forever? And Maria looked at Eva: Isn't it awful how that doll resembles Karl? And Eva looked at her mother: Those black curls on the temple, and that wide mustache—it's just like Karl. Then they all turned away, and did not answer Ulrika with a single word.

Ulrika crept away. Everyone said: The trouble with her is that she doesn't work properly. But nobody dared order her to do anything.

She went up to the front room, whimpering that not only did she have to bear a great sorrow but she also had to put up with unkind words from those around her. They wanted to belittle Karl in every way and take him away from her. She sat down on the bed and conjured up his face and voice: "I'll never love anybody but you . . . surely even a stone can see we're meant for each other . . . Ullika, Bullika. . . ."

She wanted to sink into her pillow, in her pining for Karl.

The doll stared at her with metallic eyes. It was Karl, but he was a doll. And the face said, without moving: "Sometimes you're so childish you ought to have a doll for a sweetheart." It was Karl's voice, but lifeless and without the teasing note it had had in reality. She stood by the bed, staring, and for a moment the doll grew to human size, only to shrink back to doll-size again. But it was Karl all the time. Only he was a doll!

Ulrika screamed, so that she could be heard all over the house.

Somebody fetched her down from the front room, and she did not go up there again.

Oh, the shame of the unseemly vision!

GRADUALLY the memory of the doll's face crowded out the memory of the real Karl. She could not get past the buttons to the living eyes. And it was she herself who had created the distorted picture. What terrible things might not happen to the real Karl, in far-off America, if he could suffer such an indignity in Ulrika's heart and hands.

Ulrika made herself dwindle by forgetting. Rather than live with a doll before her eyes, she refrained from conjuring up the memory of Karl.

She shrank to such an extent that her blind grandmother kept on asking for her.

"Where's Ulrika? I can never feel where she's sitting . . ."

Her sleep was uneventful, and for many weeks she did not dream at all. But a dream word sprouted beneath the bark of her oblivion, and one May morning it burst into a whisper which woke her.

Baby Karl.

She wept, and tried to stop herself, and grew angry, and said that she had no part in any expectation; to be broken up by the world like dry turf was all that would happen to her.

Baby Karl.

She tied her kerchief low over her face as in a game of Blind Man's Buff, and was about to dwindle still further when she remembered him, and where he was, pushing and

kicking—and a giggle passed through her which gave her a stab of pain right down the spine.

Baby Karl.

She had to write a letter to him.

In the faint white light of dusk she went along to the West Stahls' with her missive.

Linda had grown enormous, but was no longer so crushingly brisk.

"How invisible you've been," she said, in a voice which was almost welcoming.

"I have," Ulrika replied. "Sometimes one doesn't feel like being seen."

And then she pulled out the letter she had written, which was not really a letter at all, and hemmed and hawed, while Linda turned gentle and pretended to plead with her, saying that it must be a riddle or a song or something and she had to let them see.

Leander and Hanna were out and everything was almost as secretive as in the early days of their sorrow. Ulrika displayed her verses.

My vigil is a bird
which has fallen from its nest
its wings are broken

My vigil is a rose
which blossoms 'neath snow
and nobody can see it.

I have a friend whose vigil
warms itself in the nest,
it has a rose in its beak.

"Just imagine that," Linda said. "The bird had the worst of it. The bit about its wings being broken is the saddest of all.

I know a good word, if you should want a rhyme. Token. But it isn't really necessary. The poem's all right as it is."

It pained Ulrika to see Linda so indulgent, and tempted her to look up again and take an interest.

"What about putting music to your verses? I've hardly touched the accordion since the last dance in the barn here." Linda put a couple of logs on the fire in the front room and took out the accordion.

"It's so long since I played that I've almost forgotten how. And there's scarcely room for the clumsy thing on my knee," Linda said.

"You're not to squeeze him!" Ulrika exclaimed.

The notes issuing from the accordion were coarse, they jerked and whined and dragged themselves along, and never merged into a hymn for something one longed for. But they gradually created a feeling of longing itself, just as a bird remains a bird, even if its wings are broken.

Hanna and Leander came in; one from the stable and the other from the barn. Leander said manful words about the horse, how hard its mouth was, and how it drank more than usual, that he must get a curry-comb for it, and so on. He always had a lot to say about the horse. Hanna declared that they were happy Ulrika had found her way to them again.

The girls went on playing and singing and repeating tunes. They were young, and the music and the fire lifted them for a while out of their troubles.

Leander stood in the kitchen, watching them through the front door of the front room. His body looked as if it hung from the yoke of his shoulders, and he breathed in gasps. He stood there staring at the two girls as they hummed and sang, and every time they came to "*a ro-o-ose which blossoms 'neath the snow,*" a tremor ran through him.

He gazed at Linda, who was saving her own honor by saving his. He looked at Ulrika, then at Linda, and then at Ulrika again, and shivered with cold.

He went out into the stable doorway, and stayed away so long that Hanna came and looked for him, to tell him that supper had been ready for some time.

"What are you doing, Leander?"

"I'm hiding the bicycle."

"I've often wondered whose it could be," Hanna said.

"Ulrika mustn't see it," Leander replied.

At last the bridegroom-to-be came into the kitchen, with wisps of straw sticking to his clothes. They were about to sit down to supper but Ulrika wanted to leave. She did not like Leander's looking at her with such concern—almost as if they were not rivals at all.

Both Hanna and Linda urged her to stay and take a plate of porridge with them. They were persuasive in their friendliness, and Ulrika stood hesitating by the door. But she thought that she really ought to go, and put her hand on the doorknob.

Linda suddenly felt a rush of strong, heedless, sisterly love.

"Don't go," she said.

"But really, I ought to," Ulrika said, hesitating.

Linda was so importunate in her gaze and voice, that even Ulrika felt it, and peered up at her from beneath the edge of her kerchief.

The fear of losing a newly won sister seized Linda like a cramp. Her face grew pale.

"So that's the way it is," Hanna said solemnly.

For a moment they were all silent. Then Ulrika came back from the door, and Leander said that if Linda's time had really come, he might as well harness the horse and go fetch . . .

Hanna made up Linda's bed with clean sheets, prepared the

cradle and tiptoed about, putting things in order. The girls sat looking at each other, and when the pains came on they walked round the cottage. Ulrika had to push back her kerchief again and again, and soon became quite bare-headed.

Between the contractions, Linda joked and poked fun at the villagers but when the pains got worse, she scolded them in front of Hanna and Ulrika. She said that when the girls they approved of were about to give birth, the neighbors always came to visit them during the last few days, to ask them how they felt, but when it was her turn all of them just sat at home, sneering. Aunt Karin, for instance, who was so pious that she even went to visit Manda—had she been down to West Stahls' as much as once recently? No, she had not!

"But Edit's on her death bed—she just manages to keep alive for the child's sake. Karin can hardly leave her own daughter," Hanna said.

"Shhh! Edit's been lying on her death bed for as long as I can remember. They've been feeding her with barley water for half a year now. If it had been anyone but me, Aunt Karin would surely have had time to come," Linda said, and sat down, rocking herself.

Ulrika stood between the door and the bed, just as Karl had done that morning, and with the same shamefaced expression, unable to comfort and unable to leave.

"You ought really to be glad that Aunt Karin hasn't come here," she said. "You must remember that Edit has the consumption and an infection might come along with her, and get to Baby Karl."

Linda grew angry, and saw that the time had come for revenge.

"Supposing I was to get the consumption—that wouldn't matter, as long as Baby Karl is saved. One would need to

have been the sweetheart of the real Karl to talk the way you do!"

For nine months she had protected Ulrika from the secret, and now she gave it away with the word "real."

But Ulrika's distressed mind did not grasp the significance of such stray words.

She only heard that Linda was teasing her about Karl, and this banter was like a sign of life from the beloved, and it gave her oblivion a twinge. Her smile was that of the real sweetheart.

"How I pity all nice nitwits!" Linda exclaimed.

Soon after she was to be pitied herself, and sought support from Ulrika's hands, boring her fingernails into them.

They did not notice it until the pain had subsided, and then they smiled at each other like sisters.

For as long as she was able, Linda worked on the picture of Linda Stahl which she wished the villagers to see, storming that they all said such malicious and untruthful things about her, and saying that she was going to show them.

And Ulrika tried to preserve her emptiness, and be a wisp of a girl carrying a doll on her back.

But the pains increased during the night, and shut Linda into herself. In the agony which took possession of her, she had to give up all effort to play a part.

And Ulrika was forced to raise her eyes, forced gradually to attain her real self. It was impossible to remain blind and unfeeling at the sight of such suffering; she had to take an interest, had to forget her own oblivion. Even so, she fell short, burst into tears and had to accept rebukes from the midwife.

"Do you imagine you're being kind to a woman in labor

by standing there, fussing about and agreeing with her? This job that's got to be done—nothing to be soft about!”

“Don't you care about her being in pain?”

“It'll soon be over. And then she won't have any children before she's married, and that may be years away. But I myself will be delivering one child a week for the next two months. What d'you suppose would become of me if I was to feel as strongly about each confinement as the woman that's giving birth? Next week this girl Linda will be sitting up laughing, with a brat on her knee, and you won't catch her asking after Svea in Yrbacka, who'll be groaning on her bed then.”

Oaths and prayers, streaming fluids, the cottage throbbing with life and agony—there was no room there for dreams or dolls.

And the hour of delivery for Linda, the suffering of the animal, the bellowing.

Memory fled, leaving her enclosed in a present which crept slowly along the blade of a scythe.

AFTER the child arrived, both Hanna and Ulrika behaved as though they themselves had been delivered. They went around rosy and shining-eyed, like women who had just got out of bed after a confinement, while Linda lay in the front room, gray and cold and dull. There was not a drop of milk in her breasts. But neither Hanna nor Ulrika said this was a pity, they greedily accepted every opportunity to occupy themselves with the tiny boy. There was just enough of him to be shared by two, and it was as well that Linda renounced all rights.

Hanna and Ulrika lay in the kitchen at night, and the cradle stood by the stove. If the child gave the slightest whimper, both women would wake and steal out of bed as swiftly and silently as spirits. They met at the cradle and discussed in whispers what could be the matter with him.

"Maybe he's cold."

"Maybe he's hungry."

"Maybe he's too tightly swaddled . . ."

"Maybe he's wet."

"We'd better take him up."

They lifted him up, felt his body, smelled him. One of them would then carry him once round the room while the other lit the stove and warmed the milk mixture. They kept vigil, busied themselves over him, and devised unnecessary things

to do for his sake. They put him in diapers which had been warmed by their own skins, the warmth of the stove being considered too rough for him, and walked round with diapers inside their blouses, their bosoms as ample as those of wet nurses.

The days were full of delicious tasks.

Leander, feeling left out, tried to approach Linda. It was she and him, wasn't it, who were the true conspirators?

But, for the most part, Linda lay with her head against the bed rail, and when she did look up, her eyes were always full of animosity. She hated him because he was not the one she had a right to hate.

Her joking with Leander, the game of their being sweethearts, and her boasting about him, was as remote as early childhood. It was all nonsense, which could not be repeated, now that she had grown so old.

She lay there, a querulous invalid, complaining about the food and letting Hanna and Ulrika make a fuss over her. They waited on her as if in a dream, her contemptuous voice could not reach them; they loved.

"... floating about like some kind of queens. Too grand to give birth yourselves. One employs a serving wench for that. A cow—that's of no importance. Queens don't ask how it feels to trickle slowly down the blade of a scythe. As long as they get their offspring to lick, they're content."

"I know it was difficult," said Ulrika shamefacedly.

"You don't know a thing."

"But it's over now, after all, and everything was all right," said Hanna.

"You're as cruel as the midwife. Was all right, indeed! I'm still in the middle of it. I can't think of anything else. What is it that's all right in pain like that?"

"But a fine child—surely it's worth suffering a while for that . . ."

"No, it isn't. Nothing is worth that much."

One afternoon, Linda was lying alone in the front room while the baby slept in the kitchen. She got up and put on a few clothes but every movement was such an effort that she soon felt exhausted. Nonetheless, she wanted to use this moment of privacy to look at the world with the old eyes she had now acquired.

She went out into the kitchen, and bent over the child in the cradle, caught a glimpse of it, and was obliged to sit down. Sitting there, she remembered the fine convolutions of its ear, which had veins like the petal of a flower. She had to smile, and this demanded more strength than any other movement.

A miserable whimper rose from the cradle, a sound which was in tune with her own exhaustion. But the child's helplessness increased her own, instead of drawing forth some strength. She felt that the child was a rival for the compensation which life must surely have in store for her. He might indeed be innocent but the injustice which had been committed against her must be requited before the claims of a child . . .

She went out into the yard. The snow had melted while she had been in bed and the yard was bare except for one dirty, shriveled-up drift.

Looking up the hill she thought of the worn-out mothers on all the farms. Was the submissiveness of the women the source of the Village Whisper? If so, she would never be able to share in it. The pain she had endured was an insult, and it would be wrong to forget it.

But whom could she accuse, who could give her redress?

Simon, where are you?

Who helps you to exist?

How did that child come through me?

Why does anything exist?

She stood there, as pale as the air, sending up thin, naked questions. There was a stillness in nature between the thaw of the daytime and the frost of evening; the things which had melted did not know whether to retain their softness or to become frozen again.

Leander came across from the stables. He began carefully to reproach her for having gone out so lightly clad, supported her, and carried her up the steps and into the house. She lay down on the bed and felt herself falling, deeper and deeper.

Leander went to the north window, and spoke to her while he looked out. He must now, at long last, have a talk with her. It couldn't be helped that she looked so pale. She could not forever wrap herself up in her weakness and make out that every hour of the day was unsuitable for conversation. He was going to cheer her up.

Staring stubbornly at the weathercock at Vestbergs', he began to speak:

"I've waited for you. Believe me, I've waited for you for many years. I remember one summer morning when you were small, only twelve years old, and a pert little thing, and me a grown man. You stood on the porch in your nightgown, so fetching . . . and you said to me, "Whats-that-to-do-with-you?" I received a kind of sign then that you were the girl I was to wait for until you grew up. That's more than seven years ago. I've devoted many years to you, I have. But I didn't dare propose to you before I'd had another sign. And when I heard you was expecting the boy, young Leander, I knew that

the time was come to step forward and do my duty. I couldn't have had a better sign that you needed me. And now, when it's all over and all right, surely we two oughtn't to wait very long before we get married proper and settle down. When do you think you'll feel well enough to drive over to the parson?"

Linda looked up, and the pupils of her eyes were like nail heads.

"Never," she replied.

THE newborn child was christened Karl Simon Leander.

The godmother, the woman who had borne him and the betrothed had each given him a name and the village said that it was disgusting and just like Linda.

But they seldom had occasion to show her what they thought, for she gave up visiting the farms and stayed at the bottom of the hill, in silence. She started a ruthless persecution of all dirt and untidiness caused by humans, washing and cleaning for all she was worth. Like all other housewives in the village, Hanna had one big clean-up in the spring and another in the autumn, and that was considered sufficient, baby-washing apart. But Hanna knew that women occasionally developed a mania for cleanliness (it was something inescapable in their consciences which drove them to it) and that one should not oppose it even though it meant taking time and strength from more useful occupations. Linda went about the house in a slow and solemn manner, and usually wore light-colored clothes on weekdays as well as on the Sabbath.

Now there was neither forgiveness nor the faintest trace of the sweetheart in her voice when she spoke to Leander.

"I wish you'd keep the copper bucket full of water."

"For the Lord's sake, I'm scarcely at anything else all day except carrying water for you! If you're to continue washing

like this, we'll have the well run dry before midsummer."

At this, she picked up the pail to fetch water herself, but Leander took it from her, saying that of course he would go and they struggled together in the doorway. She spoke to him politely, in a low voice:

"I'd rather go myself than listen to your grumbling. Things are difficult enough for me without your moans. I'm so weak that I can hardly stand and yet if I ask a big, strong fellow like yourself for a pail of water, you let me see it's asking too much. Then I'd rather go myself. I can't bear your grumbling; that tires me out more than anything else."

They competed as to which of them was the more injured.

Linda spoke so quietly that Leander had to strain his ears to catch what she was saying and he himself kept heaving long, shuddering sighs, which she could not avoid hearing, but which only had the effect of driving her to do more washing.

"Have you never thought there might be a war?" he once asked, in an accusing voice.

"No—I suppose you have to be a man to figure a thing like that out," she answered.

Hanna, who lived in the world of the cradle, seldom noticed that the betrothed couple sighed and were silent and spoke out of step. But the words about war penetrated to her, and she said reprovingly:

"Now you're just being childish. Bringing in talk about war just because you're sore at each other. It's not right."

ONCE upon a time there was a father who had gone to America, leaving his betrothed behind on her father's farm. . . .

Elof Stahl was a farmer of stature, but he had been modest in all other respects. The business of house, home and feelings had been attended to by his wife, Ida. Children were born, and clustered round Ida like small shoots or creepers, but they were only there to increase her amiability, he had not needed to waste any thoughts on that aspect of life. Except for one time, when a flash of paternal conscience had passed through him and he said he had three daughters who lived in extreme danger of being raped, and had chased away a poor lad they had had on the farm. There had been something boastful in his anxiety at the time, and in all the commotion he had caused with the story. He felt ashamed when he thought about it. For he had, in fact, scarcely known that he was a father, in those days.

Then, suddenly, a daughter of his was prostrated with grief, and he saw that he had a daughter. And life could no longer be contained in the cultivation of the soil.

He began by speaking to Ida, and took counsel with her; he did not wish to leave it to his wife to look after the child alone. He tried to think, himself, in every direction, about what could be done for the sorrowing girl.

"Sometimes I feel like writing to the King himself, to ask how one can get hold of a fellow who's gone off to America like that."

"Why not send greetings from Ant Viktor," Ida mocked.

"I'm not used to young people and engaged couples," he went on. "And he seemed so taken with her. And looked honest and hard-working . . ."

"So you've never understood . . ."

"No, is there anything you can understand in this business?"

The question came so simply that Ida concealed the product of her reasoning.

"Ulrika takes after you in her entire disposition; that gets clearer and clearer," she said, to divert him.

At every big church festival and sometimes in between them Elof would suggest that they all drive to church. But Ulrika never wanted to come along, saying she would rather stay home and look after the house.

Her father made a habit of buying her some little present in the church square. In the presence of his younger daughters he would purchase a ball of crochet wool and other small things for "the girl who stayed home."

One day when they had come home from such a visit, and Elof had bought a length of flowered muslin, he sat at the kitchen table, feeling it with his fingers and repeating:

"Where's Ulrika? Is she upstairs?"

"No, indeed not. She'll be over at Linda's, as usual."

"You'd think she'd have some idea her father's bought her something in return for seeing to the cows and the house while we were away."

Eva and Maria were sitting together on the woodbox looking at their father, and at the flowered muslin.

"Is it really such a big thing, looking after the farm alone for a single festival?" Maria said.

"She scarcely puts her foot in the barn on weekdays," Eva added.

Elof went red.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

Maria began crying from fear at the expression on her father's face and quickly went on to say, at last, what she had been thinking.

"Ulrika, she's to have all the rights. Everything has to stand on tiptoe for her. Mamma did not let us go dancing, though there were dances in two of the church huts last Saturday. As soon as we want to have any fun, it's always "Remember what happened to Ulrika!" Are we all three to turn into old maids, simply because Ulrika's gone and put herself on the shelf?"

Elof crossed the floor toward her, his clenched fists showing red against his shirt cuffs.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" he repeated.

At this moment Ida went between them, holding out her arms and looking at Elof.

"If our girls have turned out so well without being whipped when they were small, there won't be any beatings now that they're grown-up. And anyhow, Maria's right, in a way," she said.

Elof stood in front of his wife, not knowing what to do with himself, for he felt as if a March thaw had set in in his entire body, with sudden avalanches in the region of his heart. Ida was wrong, of course, but it was a good thing that she was standing in his way. Even if she did not understand how he felt, she was more used to handling emotions than he was. And Maria and Eva were persons, too, after all, though nothing out of the ordinary had happened to them.

Elof went out and dipped his hands in the soft snow. Just then, Ulrika came across from the neighboring farm. She looked frail and cold, and did not ask what her father

was digging for. She never seemed to notice if there was anything unusual about him. A year or two earlier, one of the girls—maybe Ulrika, maybe each of them in turn—had said, with a delicacy acquired by her absence from home for confirmation, “Ugh, Father, how can you take snuff!” Elof had not opened his snuffbox all winter, but Ulrika had not noticed.

“Father’s bought dress material for you,” her mother said, when Ulrika came in. “There it is, over on the table.”

“I don’t need any. I’ve been given so much material all winter for my sewing. I don’t need a new dress this year. Anybody who wants it can have it.”

And the material was put away, and not mentioned again.

Thus, Ulrika somehow always failed to observe her father’s solicitude.

“If I could understand why she keeps up with that girl, Linda,” he exclaimed. This was before the incident of the doll boy.

“Well, I’ve certainly done my best to prevent it. But there’s something about Ulrika this year which makes me afraid of handling the matter without mittens,” Ida replied.

“I should say so!”

“Have you noticed what she looks like when she’s been to fetch the mail?”

“Yes, I have. Now and then.”

“It makes me dread those days. She dresses up just as if her sweetheart was coming with the mailbag himself and off she dances up the hill. And when she comes back down again, it’s like seeing an old beggar woman who’s been flogged. How I wish I could spare her that! And when you think how the others who’ve come for their mail stand round in the shop, staring at her . . .”

“Why is it impossible to shoulder . . . when you even offer yourself . . . ?” Elof said, to space.

"I hang there, in the window, worse than Manda, following her step by step when she shuffles down the hill after those trips to the post office; and I tell one of the girls to put on the coffee and the waffle iron, so we'll have something to take her mind off when she comes back. But when she gets to the crossroads, off she goes in the other direction, straight to the West Stahls'! Linda's the person to go to! Linda, who's just . . . Linda, of all people, she's the one Ulrika's chosen to confide in."

Ida choked with sobs and red streaks appeared on her face.

"That's because Ulrika's kind," ventured Elof, with a tender smile. "From what I've heard, that Linda's had a sad time of it this winter. And farmers' wenches can be pretty hard on one who's in trouble. But Ulrika's kind, there's that about Ulrika, she's kind in a special way . . ."

The sight of his infatuated expression made Ida lose her temper completely.

"Kind, did you say! She's just a nitwit who doesn't understand a thing. She's so dumb there's only one other in this parish who can compete with her, and that's her own father. It makes me so angry I feel like bursting. And I can tell you, if Ulrika wasn't between us, I don't know what I'd do with that bitch, Linda. That little viper! That thieving whore!"

"Come, come, now; surely you're exaggerating. It's not right, certainly, that bastards are born, but if you look at it sensibly, it's a queer thing that there aren't more of that sort brought into the world."

Ida dreamed that all the women in the village sat counting on their fingers, week by week backward from the date of Linda's delivery, and that she watched how they calculated, with their heads nodding, the old ones with kerchiefs knotted

under their chins, the young ones with theirs knotted at the back of their necks. They nodded and babbled and made comparisons, and argued about the number of days in February, and Ida sat there listening, and trying in vain to muddle them in their counting, while Ulrika went around showing a child's shirt as if she were at a sewing bee. She flitted about, holding up a tiny white garment which nobody would look at, without understanding what they were all so busy with. The calculations boomed on, down to the ninth of August, 1913, and then there was a sudden silence, and Augusta said, "That fits exactly," and Ida woke with a groan.

In her waking hours she reflected that this was exactly how things were in reality. Her child was a lamb among wolves, and it was only a question of time until one of them would begin to worry her. And, in reality, Ida knew of no one more dangerous than Linda. How would that chatterbox, Linda, be able to keep such a secret? In the situation she had got herself into, this was a lot to expect. Every day now, the lamb went into the wild beast's cage, and came out again, "*But, O Lord, how long will I be able to keep things to myself, how long will it be before I sit down and tell the girl myself how deceived she's been . . . ?*"

Nonetheless, there was only one person who could wound Ulrika at this time, and that was Leander. In the first place, he had soiled her friendship with Linda and, after the delivery, he continuously disturbed the atmosphere around Baby Karl by calling him "my son," and "my boy," and claiming that he should be called "Leander." This was so unsuitable, that Ulrika was often ready to snub him.

But the more coldly she treated him the more obtrusively paternal he became.

Leander liked being with Ulrika. The thought fluttered in his imagination that he might some day be able to make her hate him properly. When her coldness would become so icy that it would burn him. When it would be sufficient that he be present for her to seek him out with a stinging word.

THE child made Ulrika gentle. She grew out of her withered condition, and was obliged to feel joy and sorrow with her whole being. The child released her from the thoughts about the doll which had hindered and protected her, and she could again remember Karl's eyes, alive and moist.

And the summer comforted Linda, coaxing out of her the memory of her confinement. She went on daily renewing her vow never to forget the endless scythe of pain she had known. But the mild days claimed that the scythe had bent and closed, and that it had indeed an end.

The sun shone on women, calves and children, and it did not even darken above men. Sometimes, when nobody saw her, Linda walked around laughing with joy over the sun and did not care that it was so unfair. And without having any special errand to each other, Linda and Ulrika would often meet on a summer evening and walk a while together, or sit down in the ditch and give their sorrows a rest.

"You see, nobody at home really understands what I'm going through."

"At home, they think I'm only a child."

"And yet one is really so old, that . . ."

They sat picking flowers, or threading bluebells on their fingers.

"Funny how old one can become, all of a sudden."

If a breeze kept the mosquitoes away, they often stayed and mourned seriously.

"Have you ever felt guilty?" Linda asked.

"Indeed I have," said Ulrika.

"What had you done?"

"I don't know."

"You talk just like Mother. Poor, sinful creatures and so on."

"Well, I couldn't expect you to understand it. But I must have done something wrong since he went away like that."

"And you can't believe that it was he who did something wrong?"

"No . . . but of course you can't understand that," Ulrika said, as she had said so often.

Linda bent down toward some milfoil that was difficult to break off.

"But otherwise, you haven't ever felt guilty," she continued.

"Oh, I dare say I've been unfair sometimes. It's like that, when you're three sisters. Eva and Maria are always so jealous. They're so childish. But you can't hurt each other really, when you're sisters."

"But I mean something real, something bad," Linda said.

"There was a shameful thing I once believed about you," Ulrika replied.

Linda gave her attention to some serpent-grass, holding her breath above its star-white ears.

"I thought it was you who had stolen my rose kerchief—do you remember? I believed that until it got out that it was Simon who did it."

"Do you ever think about Simon. . .?"

"No—not except for that."

"But if I was to tell you that it was me, and not Simon, who took the kerchief—what would you say then?"

"Why, isn't that a piece of luck! Then I didn't have such great reason to be ashamed as I thought. Good heavens above, it seems so much more reasonable that you, being a girl, would want a thing like that, than a boy. And surely every child steals at least once in his life, before he learns the difference between mine and thine! At home, we used to steal from Mother. All three of us pinched things, I know that. But you can't be expected to go on being ashamed of such actions all your life, can you?"

"Don't you ever wonder if it was wrong to send Simon away?"

"Well, no . . . after all, it happened so long ago . . . It was Father and several grown-up men who decided . . . and hadn't he done something real indecent at the Bible School. . .?"

"But did you never see who he was?"

"How d'you mean, *was*? Surely there wasn't anything special about him?"

"Oh, if only someone else had seen who he really was," Linda wailed.

"Not that I can understand there was anything particular about him," said Ulrika. "But to know that you're the only one in the world who really understands another human being—do you think it's the same for everybody? That each of us is given someone special to understand? I believe that, you know."

"But supposing you betray that person?" The words escaped from Linda like a cry of distress.

"But surely one doesn't do that, if one really understands," Ulrika retorted.

"Don't you believe it's possible to betray someone, even though you love him?"

"Not Karl. Never Karl. That I know, for sure. But then nobody else can have any idea of what he's like."

"But if you found out that it was he who had done wrong, would you not be able to forgive him then?"

"*If*s like that aren't my concern."

"Why did he leave you, then, if he was so perfect?" said Linda, and blew a dandelion globe to pieces.

Ulrika wound herself rings of grass.

"I've stopped thinking about that. When we meet he'll tell me why; and then everything will be explained and we'll just laugh at this winter."

She lay down on her back in the flowering grass.

"But still. Sometimes I get so tired, Linda. So tired of being the only one who knows. And the whole of life passes so slowly. It's just like the last evening Karl came to see me. All I longed for was the next part, that we would all get up from the table so that Karl and I could go away by ourselves. And we sat there for an eternity. We just sat and sat. And I get so tired of its never coming to an end. If I only got a sign, I'd get up from the table and then the next part would come . . . and then Karl will arrive and say . . . and then he himself will tell me about everything I know already . . . and then he will give me the ring, and then only we two . . ."

She murmured and fell asleep in the middle of a sentence.

Linda lay down beside her and stared up into the pale sky.

A thin, white-streaked veil stretched across it, and was dappled toward the earth both in east and west.

She raised herself on one elbow, and stared down at Ulrika, sleeping there in good faith. It was restful to look at her ordinary face and the water-soft hair. A horizontal wrinkle on her upper lip was the only indication of self-will in her

features. Ulrika's pretty side is turned inward, the old women used to say.

If she were only my daughter, so that I could protect her, so that she would always remain in good faith, Linda thought.

No, I wouldn't be able to stand always seeing her stupidity.

But if we both were daughters to someone—Someone—who was sufficiently good to tell the truth.

Our secrets make us feel so cold.

ONCE again it was time for the West Stahls to go up to Gnome Mountain for the haymaking, and Hanna and Ulrika, who had got on so well together tending to Baby Karl, began a discreet battle for him. Which of them had the greater right to him?

"Surely it's me; I'm his grandmother," came the claim from Hanna's bosom.

"Yes, but he's *Baby Karl*," replied Ulrika to herself.

In the end, things went so far that Ulrika spoke her thoughts.

"I've been thinking it'll be troublesome for you to keep a baby up there, at Gnome Mountain. He's heavy to carry, and it'll be impractical in lots of ways. So, if you like, Aunt Hanna, I can easily look after Baby Karl those few weeks when you're haymaking. After all, I'm so used to handling him now."

Ulrika tried her best to sound helpful, and Hanna pretended that she was replying in the same vein.

"That's real kind of you, Ulrika. But I wonder if Elof and Ida would be all that pleased to have a baby in the house just now, with the duck shooting and all. An infant's a lot of trouble, and particularly one that has to be brought up on the bottle."

Hanna was the stronger of the two and Ulrika's lip grew long. Then Hanna regretted her selfishness. She was the only one who understood what Ulrika now had to give up.

So she dropped all circumlocution and said:

"It's another matter if the Elofs will let you come with us to Gnome Mountain. In that case, you're welcome."

Then Ulrika ran home and told her family that she had promised to be a nursemaid for a couple of weeks.

Ida said no, and so did Elof.

They had both been accommodating and allowed her to do all sorts of mad things, but they drew the line here. Never in their life would they permit Ulrika to stay away from home with Linda for so long.

It was useless for Ulrika to try to persuade her parents when they were both of the same mind. Ulrika was so much better now that she must be able to endure a refusal.

One morning, however, when Ida stepped out of the bakehouse, she bumped into Ulrika coming from the main cottage on her way to the neighbors' with a bundle in her hand. There were reproaches, Elof came out, Ulrika wept and her parents became doubtful once more.

"Well, I simply won't agree to your being away for so long. In a place like that."

"But I must be allowed to be with Baby Karl. He needs me. I have to . . ."

"In that case, it would be far better for the child to stay here with us, and you look after it here, instead of chasing off like that."

"But Aunt Hanna doesn't want to let him go either. I've asked her, but she's said no."

"If only it didn't go so bitterly against the grain to go over there! No, I haven't the legs to carry me on such an errand," said Ida. "Can't you pull yourself together and be sensible?"

Ulrika wept. Elof stood beside her, breathing heavily.

"I'll go over and speak to Hanna," he said.

When Elof came into the yard at Old Adam's, Leander

was standing there, winding sackcloth around the scythes. It was clear they were going up to the hill pastures that very day.

Elof looked at Leander and thought vaguely that this was the child's father, whom everyone lately had begun to call "the sweetheart" in such mocking tones.

Hanna came out of the barn, and Elof thought about what he would do if Hanna said no. There was a short exchange of words between them but most of their business was done through glances, and Hanna said yes.

She went in to fetch the child and came out with a knapsack of toilet articles, which were already packed. She handed the child and the bundle to him, crooking his arm so that it supported the baby's neck, and she smiled all the time, although tears ran down her cheeks.

Elof could not remember having held such a small child in his arms before, although he must sometimes have carried his daughters when they were tiny.

Linda came out on the steps, tall, thin and serious. She gave Elof a reserved greeting where he stood, shivering, beneath her on the pine branches. He had the Village Whisper in him and was one of the men for whom she had sacrificed Simon.

She might have said to Elof that the child was hers and asked him the reason for his visit. Then she saw Leander and remembered the fight with Ant Viktor and its bitter after-taste. She could triumph over all of them if she liked but she would never gain anything by doing so. But she allowed herself to look at Elof. He did not have a straight gaze this morning; he shrank away from her and went off, with long, ashamed steps.

When he had come halfway to Old Farm, Elof had to pause. It was so strangely taxing to carry this light burden. One

minute he felt as though he were going to drop the child and the next that he might injure it by holding it too tightly with his large hands. He left the path and leaned against the stone wall, to collect the light strength which was required to carry such a remarkable, small being.

And then, quite by chance, he noticed that the bundle had a face, just like a human being. The farmer stared at the child. Imagine anything so independent as this tiny creature. So oblivious of its own role as a punishment for sin, of the trouble it had caused Farmer Elof, of how it had humiliated him this bright morning. This baby was not a bit shy; he did not need subterfuge. He wasn't supercilious, either, but smiled up at the farmer for no special reason, simply as a favor.

And Elof looked at the child, looked again and forgot time, forgot that he was in the midst of the harvest, and looked with a curiosity that kept on growing. The tiny hands were so small, it seemed impossible for five fingers to find room on each of them. He began counting the fingers and, somewhere deep in his soul, far below his features, something trembled, and smiled.

And as he stood there, examining everything there was to see outside the swaddling clothes, he came to the baby's eyes and noticed how brown they were. And he remembered another pair of brown eyes, down there on the hill. He sought support in Leander and Linda. But there was no consolation to be had there. He had recently noticed that they had light eyes like himself, like his entire family, like everyone he knew except that one person. A number of small things fitted together, if one once started thinking in that direction. And words of Ida's, thoughts and hints to which he had never before paid attention.

Elof gazed along the great stone wall, the pride of Old Farm, the wall which spoke for itself in such a way that the

farmer himself was able to remain silent. And he felt that these stones could be used for one purpose only, and when he had felt that and tried to look at them, one by one, they grew soft before his eyes, and trembled, and curled up like leaves in a flame.

He stood there, and his body felt limp and loathsome.

"Ulrika," he said in a low voice. "Ulrika."

And there she was, in front of him, laughing and chattering—How wonderful that Hanna has let her little treasure go, and how good of you, Father, to be so sweet, and you'll see I won't go wasting any time in unnecessary fussing—isn't it fun to hold him, but I must be allowed to carry him the rest of the way, I just couldn't wait, but had to come and meet you—but, Father, what's the matter, aren't you feeling well? You look so strange . . ."

No, he was not feeling well, he had never felt worse; and it was high time he handed over the innocent child. In Ulrika's arms, no evil could befall it.

She walked ahead of her father, humming nonsensical words of endearment to Baby Karl.

But who will carry Ulrika, her father wondered. Who will take care of her, on the day she comes to understand what she already knows?

THE news that Linda's child was being looked after by Ulrika soon got about and the village women began inventing errands to Old Farm to have a look, just as if it had been a child born in wedlock.

Ida dared not leave Ulrika and the child alone with any stranger, for fear the truth would come out. People had a way of observing Ulrika which drove Ida frantic. She was ready to fall out with every woman in the village, if only she could be spared these visits.

In the end, it became quite unpleasant to meet Ida. She looked so fierce that everyone she met felt herself suspected of wanting to harm Ulrika, when it was really quite the opposite! The neighbors said that nothing good could come of all this secrecy and silence. There was something nauseating about the whole business. If Ida were only to sit down and tell that skinny daughter of hers how things really were in this and that respect, the girl would be able to throw out the young cuckoo and eat herself plump and happy again, and get another suitor instead of wearing herself out in a vigil which could never lead to anything. Many of them felt like reminding Ida of the words, "The truth shall make you free"; but somehow one never seemed able to get at her. There was nothing but gruffness and silence and an air of "Keep your mouth shut" about Ida these days.

And now everyone knew who it was who . . .

The two coffee-makers at the dance, gray silhouettes in the early dawn, having kept a discreet silence all winter, had yielded a little when summer arrived. If they had ever met anyone who had deigned to notice them, they would have hidden that dawn meeting in the innermost corner of their hearts and never let it out in the light of day.

But because no one ever did notice them or thought them capable of observing anything, they were unable in the end to keep quiet, and so it turned out that they were the ones who provided the final proof, the most remarkable of all. If he had only taken notice of them, instead of mistaking them for spiders' webs, they might have been able to remain silent.

And by virtue of the secret they imparted they became in themselves so sensational that they would certainly have been asked to dance a few times that summer, if only there had been anybody in the village to arrange dances. But there wasn't. One did not dance; one went around knowing why there had been no more dances down in the West Stahls' barn.

The harvest and the village prayers, and the mail days continued as before.

When the mail arrived in the village, Ulrika would leave the house, and repeated entreaties could not stop her from going to the shop and taking the child with her. She tucked him into the little go-cart, which she herself had ridden in as a child and went off up the hill. When she came to the top, she picked him up and carried him on her arm, so that there would be no danger of an accident on the downhill slope. And everybody she met bent forward and exclaimed:

"Whose child is that?"

And Ulrika replied:

"Linda has borne him."

And the questioners continued:

"What's his name, the little fellow?"

"He's called Baby Karl."

She looked from the child to the people she met with eyes so ecstatic, and yet so piteously questioning, that the inquisitiveness of the curious went astray. It was as though they had put an unimportant question, and been faced with an infinitive problem in reply.

Gradually, the villagers became silent when Ulrika appeared. As time went on, it grew more and more unusual for people to say:

"If one had any charity in one's body, one would go to Ulrika and tell her the truth."

"TODAY I'm in a good mood," Linda said. "I'm in such a good mood that I can't even be angry with you, Leander. I think you will do quite well as you are! That's the sort of mood I'm in."

They sat in the mountain hut, eating; there was always a long break for dinner. Linda teased and laughed, though without getting much response from the other two. Now and again Hanna would say, "How well the little one must be doing today," but apart from that, she was not talkative.

"Mother, you're the kindest ma in the whole village! I realize that today, because I'm in such a good mood myself. If you don't watch out, maybe I'll stay like this forever. What would you say to that Leander?"

"There's no risk," was Leander's reply.

He could compete with her in mortification, but never in gaiety.

"Thanks for my dinner," Linda trilled. "That sour milk was delicious, even if it was a bit lumpy, on account of the dog days. Now I am off to the stream, to contemplate Nature, and to wash myself. Not that I feel I need it so badly but because I observe that Leander is tired, and wants to rest his bodily frame on the kitchen sofa. So I'll go and wash, and give the stream your love. 'I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me' "

"Shhh, Linda! Don't blaspheme," Hanna exclaimed.

"It's not that I have any proof—but I feel just as if somebody loved me. That's the sort of good mood I'm in. Isn't it queer?"

Both Hanna and Leander bowed their heads in shame for that was not the way to speak, at least not with such a joyful face.

Linda danced away, laughing. Although she was alone she continued to talk.

"Why can't they stand my words? It's just as if I was stealing something from them."

If only there were a few more people around, she thought. Then they wouldn't need to be so mean with themselves. And it wouldn't have to bring down the whole world if someone like me used a word or two wrongly. People would have other things to attend to than spy on me, and grudge me everything. And I would have been able to keep Simon and bathe with him in the river. And elks would not have to fall head-first into gulleys.

She sat down on a stone after her dip, and went on embroidering golden threads in the pattern of the day's good mood. The air was still, mosquitoes were getting troublesome, and she reached idly for the bottle of kerosene fastened to her waistband. At that moment, a man came walking along the edge of the river and she put the bottle away.

Linda could hardly decide whether he was part of her imagination or whether he had a life of his own. He was tall, fair, blue-eyed and smiling.

She got up from the stone and they stood opposite each other, talking and smiling, an unfamiliar language with their lips, a warm, familiar one with their eyes. They stood talking a long time before Linda grasped what they had been saying.

It was like a dream in which one or both participate and look at themselves from the outside.

They were beautiful as they stood there, he holding some flowers in his hand and telling her this had been such a lucky day for him that he went around talking to himself out loud.

"Just think that I should have the luck, once again in my life, to come upon the norna—calypso borealis! You have no idea how unusual it is. A wild orchid, really rare." He gave her one, and she looked at his hand, which was unusual and rare and far superior to any wild orchid.

"Do you notice the scent of vanilla? Look how lovely it is, with its slender stalk, and the flower itself like a tiara. One can begin to believe in fairies when one sees something so delicate! And in the middle of its splendor, that big lip, pouting and hanging down—do you see, just like a tiny shoe. That's why they call it 'maiden slipper,' in everyday language. But its stern and noble name is Norna. My finding this orchid makes it a lucky day for me."

This discourse about a little flower did not make him seem childish. Nor, although he had fastened a handkerchief into the ribbon of his hat, so that it hung down like a veil behind his neck, did he look womanish.

". . . Virgin soil . . ." she heard him say, and she bowed her head, and was so charmed by his presence that she wanted to run away.

Gradually she became aware that he was the new forest keeper, who was to assist the old one due to retire in a couple of years, that he came from as far south as Angermanland, and that he was looking for a bridge which, according to his map, ought to lie somewhere in the vicinity. Linda was able to tell him that the bridge had been swept away by the spring flood of the previous year.

"But there's a shallow spot where you can wade across, a bit further up," she added.

Having said this she regretted it. He ought never to be allowed to leave their side of the river. He ought to stay and give names to everything, in his fascinating, embellishing way. She tried to keep him back, by asking if he was thirsty, or hungry, and if there was anything she could offer him. He was so fair, so handsome, so superhumanly strange, with his green hat and green, swathed legs.

"Why not—a drop of well water would be refreshing!"

Then it struck her that he, with his delicate mouth, had drunk from the same river as all sorts of animals, with their muzzles and snouts—of the same water which she herself had polluted with her body. She did not know how to set about apologizing for the river's vulgarity. Then he himself said:

"Not that I've anything against the water here. It tastes of them all, cow, horse and fox. Drinking it gives one a share in everything. And after all, we're all related through Nature, our mother."

They reached the well, and he was about to take hold of the water pole, but she forestalled him.

"All right—since you're so kind. All I can do is thank you and accept," he smiled.

Taking off his rucksack, he detached a small wooden ladle which hung on the outside. This he filled with water from the pail which she held out to him; she held it so high that he did not need to bend down and she stood holding the heavy pail in her arms while he drank.

"You mustn't stand and get cold," he said, taking the pail away from her, and this time she let him do it.

He handed her the wooden ladle, and said:

"Would you like to have it?"

She took it without a word, and curtsied.

The gift was part of the dream, but she herself felt that she was gradually awakening from the security this dream gave her. While they were still down by the river she had chattered as lightly and easily as if she spoke to strangers daily. She regretted the curtsy so much that tears welled up in her eyes and she felt that she had now put an impenetrable distance between them.

But he pretended not to notice, sat down on the well-curb and said:

"Well, you see, I'm making myself at home," in a voice which simplified everything. (As much as to say: Look at me, I'm so boorish that I sit down uninvited on your farm; you can't do anything to beat such conduct!)

"Many thanks for the ladle," she said. "Are you sure you can spare it?"

"Oh, yes, I have several at home. And look here, a short while ago I cut a lump like this off a birch tree, which will make a fine ladle when I've carved it out. That birch was a beauty," he said, looking at her. "White and straight and silken as a birch can be. But if this little lump had been allowed to go on growing, the whole tree would soon have been destroyed. It's a sort of protuberance, you see, a curly-grained growth, what we call a nodule. Now the birch will get well and I can make a useful object out of its disease—isn't that a Christian exchange?" he said, laughing.

Linda would have liked to sit down beside him, but remained where she was, paralyzed by shyness.

"Say something more," she begged. "Something more about birches."

"Oh, no, no more lecturing. You probably know more about birches than I do," he said, and smiled.

Just imagine, he thought as highly of her as of birch trees, as of everything. A birch tree would never appear to him as a sign of death.

The gentle mood began to dissolve in Linda. She felt jealous of birches and of all the things he looked at with his friendly eyes. She wished that something could be excluded from his love, so that other things would get a little more of it and that she might be the special thing which would get a little more. If he only knew how heavy it was for her to admit relationship with the birch, he would take her side.

Suddenly the stranger began to laugh.

"On Sunday, when we were walking through the woods, my small boy asked me, 'Why are the stockings of the birches knitted crosswise?' He asks a lot of questions that can't be answered, even though he is only five. He's full of ideas, the little fellow."

Now the man was not looking at her any more. He shifted the piece of wood round from one hand to the other and was preoccupied. And she knew from his laugh when he said "my small boy" and from his subsequent seriousness, that there were certain things in his life that received more love than water, birch trees and strange girls.

There was a long silence and then Linda said dully:

"Yes, it's different with different people."

He sprinkled water on the flowers and took out a tin box to put them in.

"I wonder what he'll say when he sees my lovely norna. I never know beforehand what he's going to think. Whether he'll appreciate the pale red coloring and the scent of vanilla, or whether he'll suddenly get the idea that the brown streaks in the lip resemble a spider—then he won't like it. Everything depends on how he sees it."

They were silent again for a while, and then he glanced up towards Gnome Mountain and said:

"There's a lot of gold up there that nobody has bothered to extract."

"Do you believe that fairy tale?"

"That's no fairy tale! Surely anyone can see that the forest there is worth a lot. And with a stream so close to float the logs . . ."

"Oh, you mean in that sense. Yes, I've often thought we ought to do some lumbering; but so far we have only taken out what we needed for the house."

"Do those woods belong to you? Why, then you're rich, my girl!"

His encouraging smile drew an answering one from her. This was a calmer way to talk about trees.

Hanna and Leander came out of the hut, and stopped to look at the newcomer.

"That's only my mother and a harvester," Linda said.

The man got up and went over to Hanna, saying he was the new forest keeper, that he was on his way to Söträsk and wanted to cross Gnome River, that he had tasted their exceptionally good well water, and that he hoped they would harvest a good crop of hay in return for their labor.

Hanna answered with words of one syllable while Leander merely stared at him sullenly. Linda came over and stood beside the stranger, wearing an expression which implied that she had known him for a long time and was responsible for his visit to the hill pastures.

"Well, I must be finding my way to the crossing and not disturb you any longer," he said.

He went back to the well and shouldered his rucksack.

Linda followed, while the others remained where they were, watching him go.

"Thanks again for the water," he said.

"Won't you ever come back?" Linda asked. "So that we can talk a little more about the forest?"

"Yes, I will be passing here again tomorrow. Then I'll beg another scoop of water from you."

He waved his hat in farewell to all three and went off, without looking back. They stood in a row, gazing after him.

That afternoon, Linda swung between dream and wakefulness. When she dreamed, she lingered over the picture at the river, and with a few words uttered in a voice which grew increasingly tender. Virgin soil . . . a rare flower . . . white and straight and silken . . . But wakefulness was a joy too; it gave her the wooden ladle, which she could hold in her hand and caress against her cheek and bite without its disappearing. When she was awake, she could look forward to the next day, to the forest, to a thousand days ahead, when they would walk together on Gnome Mountain, and he would point out trees for her to mark.

When she was awake she could also, unfortunately, remember the feeling of strangeness, the dazzling brightness of his being, and the son who was so full of ideas that he could compare the bark of birches to stockings. Alas, that suggested a mother with the sort of light, thin stockings worn by fine ladies.

But his words, "Why, then, you're rich, my girl!" . . . that meant that she too would be able to buy and wear silk stockings which he might remember thoughtfully.

After all, a son need not mean anything special. Come to

think of it, she had one herself although she had never actually called him "my son." Someday, when they knew each other better, she would tell the stranger about all that she had been made to suffer over that son. Once he knew about it, might he not find a place for her in his big heart?

She glided back into the dream again and they were standing together by the river, in the flickering shadow of the trees. He said to her, "You poor little thing, so white and straight and silken . . . to think that you have had to suffer so much in your virgin soil. . . ."

What was his name? Could it have been Gudmund?

"Are you going to stand here, sleeping, until the bog comes up to your nose?" Leander asked suddenly, close to her ear.

Without noticing it, she had sunk into the watery bog above her ankles. It was never wise to stand on the same patch of ground here for long as the bog always gave way, with a kind of sucking movement. The bog and Leander—wasn't the very sight of them enough to make one give vent to a string of oaths.

She seized the rake and began hurriedly to gather up the long stalks of hay he had cut round her sinking feet. Then her thoughts returned to the stranger, and to his bright vision. He would never understand her angry everyday, how dull and ugly it could be.

"Everything depends on how you see it," he had said. She, too, must begin to see things in a different way. She must stop seeing only what was distorted. She must turn her eyes to things which Gudmund would be likely to notice, interpret everything the good way. But practicing this bright vision, she would change in the end and become like him. Then the past would appear in a different light; a child of thirteen had no responsibility for a stripping of a boy. She did not need to

hang on to that memory. She must stop regarding it as a crime. She had the right to think that it was Simon's bad luck that Elof had arrived at such an unsuitable moment; that, generally speaking, it was a stupid custom never to lock a door, day or night, so that anyone might come in at any time. If some people were foolish in those days, it was surely the villagers. If anyone had been virginal, surely it was she. No, she would start thinking, "That's how things must have been intended for Simon. . . ." and use that village word, "intended," with which everyone referred to the Almighty, He Who possessed the secret of people's lives, and who ultimately decided what was bad or good for a human being.

Linda would become innocent simply by giving up feeling guilty. Ulrika never bothered about Simon or about other people's troubles or about whether there would be a war or not. Ulrika was as stupid as a flower. Linda would be like a flower too, a rare one.

In the afternoon and toward evening, she was brimming over with love. Somehow or other, she must get the others to talk about the stranger who had been up the hill pastures. The man whose secret name was Gudmund. She kept the ladle tied to her waistband, but used it at meals, displaying it, in order to make them ask her how she had got it.

She ran along beside the river, searching until she found the place where the norna grew. She caressed the three small marks which Gudmund's nornas had left, and then picked the seven which remained. She went home and put them in water and asked Leander over and over again if he didn't think they were rare flowers. She said she had been given them by Nature, our mother. Leander did not reply. He was as silent as a mirror.

The later it grew, the more wildly she tossed between dream and wakefulness, between the fantasy of believing

herself loved, and the fear that it was all mere fantasy. She had to enlist Leander's aid—if he began to suspect that she was loved, his suspicions would support her hope and bring it closer to reality. She swaggered in front of him with new movements, she walked lightly, but lifted her arms lingeringly, as though they were heavy with the memory of embraces. Finally having failed to get Leander to do so, she had to talk about the stranger herself.

"We're going to take up the question of the forest soon. He asked me if I was crazy, letting the trees stand like that, without getting a penny out of them. He said he would help me, as he is a forest keeper, and such a person knows what needs to be done. After all, I've no experience in such things and Mother's getting so old, maybe the best thing will be to let him take the reins. That's what we're going to settle tomorrow. I've been planning to start lumber work up there for a long while, but it hasn't been possible before, as we haven't had a man on the place since Father died. But things are going to be different now. And there will be an end of this damned haymaking, why you can't even wear a pair of silk stockings in this mud; but just wait until we can take the gold out of the mountain, the gold that nobody has bothered to extract. Then you'll see virginal soil in full flower."

Hanna sat alone by the window with a great armful of soft sedge, rocking it and, for long periods, appearing to forget that it was the hay for lining shoes in winter which she had taken in to twine. She turned it over and sorted it, as if she were only doing so for fun, and was in no hurry to imprison its softness in strands.

"Little one, golden cloudberry, you pinky, silver toe," she murmured.

Leander sat watching Linda, and did not give himself away with a single word.

NEXT day, Linda came in from the bog in good time before dinner. She scrubbed the floor and decorated the walls with daisies which she stuck into the moss. She did not venture to bathe in the river but washed indoors, and was careful to remove all traces of kerosene.

That day, he must come indoors and eat with them and stay for a long time. She put some ashes in the coffeepot, and took it outside to clean it. There, beside the well, Leander and the stranger were standing, and Leander was doing all the talking. How had Gudmund been able to arrive without her noticing it? And why was Leander there, so long before dinnertime?

She called a greeting but did not dare go up to the men, feeling that something had gone wrong.

The forest keeper took off his hat, said goodbye to Leander, and came toward her. But he was quite different from what he had been the day before.

"Won't you come in and have some coffee, so that we can talk about the forest?" Linda asked. But she really wanted to burst into tears for everything was already lost.

"Thank you, but I'm not thirsty. And as regards the forest, the two of you had better talk to the old keeper about that. He knows more about conditions in this part of the parish." He looked at her with mild reproach. She longed to fall down on her knees in front of him, and twine her arms about his

green legs, touch him the least little bit, merely be allowed to hear his real name. But his eyes excluded her from the relationship he had established the day before. Then, she had been jealous of the birch tree; now she was worth less than a nodule. She could not even hope that he would shake her hand.

"Good luck with the lumbering," he said and strode off.

Linda stood there with the three-legged coffeepot dangling from her hand. Soot, dirty water and coffee grounds spilled over the blue and white striped skirt she had put on expressly for the visit, but she did not notice. She just stared after the stranger, whispering "Gudmund," and trying to make out that he had not been there at all, but would really be coming later.

But a faded line in a newspaper on a wall came back to her:

"Then the King's son drew himself up to his full height and wandered away, leaving the dwarfs to their fate."

Linda turned round with an effort and saw Leander. His malice.

She flung the coffeepot at him but it failed to reach him, and struck the ground instead.

He smiled, and she suddenly saw his father in him, a glimpse of Ant Viktor's craving for power.

And she realized, too, that he might well be her brother in slyness. But this relationship, which she had once recklessly established, she saw now was no longer to her advantage.

On the previous evening Linda had gone on about her plans. Now it was Leander who did the talking. Because Linda was so young and easily led he had preferred to take matters into his own hands rather than let her get entangled in new adventures. He had told the newcomer to leave his betrothed in peace, and said that she had just got up from child-bed and was so weak she could scarcely stand her own company, far less the attentions of strange gentlemen who

put fancies into her head about forest transactions and so on. And he had stated, moreover, that it was he, Leander, who was the master, and the one to decide when timber was to be felled on Gnome Mountain. The new forest keeper was not to meddle.

"So you grudged me even speaking to another human being," Linda said faintly.

"What about me? You don't grudge me speaking to anyone, perhaps? Surely I had as much right to talk to him as you?"

"Liar!"

"I didn't say a word that wasn't true. And I was altogether within my rights, telling him how the land lies here."

"Why was I so stupid as to ever, ever let you . . . but I'll go to the parson and tell him the truth about the child!"

"Try that and you'll get sent to prison."

"Rather that than have a spy like you at my heels!"

"Don't you talk so big, now, Linda. I'm no fool that you can push around as you like. I came here to be master of this house, and I won't take being treated like a farm hand."

Linda was so infuriated that her upper lip stuck to her gums.

"Doesn't it come to the same thing—whether you're treated as a farm hand or a kitchen wench!"

Leander turned pale, the whites of his eyes rolled and Linda thought he was going to faint. But the next moment he was laughing, a small triumphant laugh, as though he had found something he had long been searching for. His eyes gleamed, and a dark glow radiated from his face.

There was something cruelly caressing about this face, an inward malice which frightened her more than his outward scorn.

"You haven't said that for nothing," he said.

Taking the whetstone out of his pocket, he spat on it, and

began to sharpen the scythe. Hanna came in from the barn, and said:

"The little one must be having a fine time today. I'm worried, though, that Ulrika won't take proper care of his navel. She can do everything else pretty well but I never noticed how she handled his navel. I daresay Ida'll have a look at it sometimes—but Ida was never careful enough with babies. Some women act as if it was a turnip they were holding. When it's only a tiny child."

Leander assumed the powers of master of the house and Linda's good mood was dissipated in sorrow. She wept with longing for Gudmund, for his presence, which made everything beautiful.

She wept with anxiety that he would come back and see her life as it really was.

She wept for fear that he would come back and believe good of her. His trust would be unendurable.

One day, however, she discovered a loss which wiped out all thought of Gudmund. Ulrika's ring was gone—and Linda did not know how or when it had disappeared. The string must have come undone, and the ring slipped off, some morning when her body was too exhausted to feel it. She searched the cottage and the garden, and answered with sobs when Hanna asked her what she was looking for so frantically. When she gazed across the marshes, she was seized by anguish. The ring must lie hidden in any of its thousands of tiny pools and the ring had tremendous value.

Supposed to be a seer, and yet can't find as much as a small lump of gold!

"Let me find Ulrika's ring, for Simon's sake," she prayed.

For a moment, she was ready to confide in Leander and ask him, for Ulrika's sake, to help her find the ring. But his expression was fixed in satisfaction over the affront she had inflicted on him and he was not receptive to new confidences.

When Sunday came round, they were all three equally eager to go down to the village. Linda brooded about Ulrika, feeling that the greatest danger was threatening her. She must do something to prevent Ulrika from suspecting anything. She would have to soothe Ulrika with a letter.

It occurred to Linda that Pers Simon would be able to help her. He had surely received letters from his brothers and sisters in America. She could beg a few old stamps from him. If she then pushed the letter beneath the post-office door, Efraim would find it and think it had fallen out of the post-man's bag. It might be a bit awkward later on, but someone who has waited a whole year for a letter lives long in the joy of the first one, and cannot immediately demand a second.

They came to the village long before it was time for the service. Hanna went off to Old Farm as soon as she had changed her clothes, her only errand being to see the little one. She always said "the little one," not daring to use any of the baptismal names.

Linda shut herself in the front room, and wrote to Ulrika in Karl's name.

My only love,

Yes, it's just as you may already have suspected, we are separated by an ocean. And if this is hard for you, it is no easier for me, although it was I who put this ocean between us.

There is not as much to say about America as you might think. Everyone says there is lots of gold to be got

here, but when it comes to the point, it is not so easy. But I would surely have managed somehow if only I had been able to keep you. If only you had been by my side, you, with your bright vision. I can be happy, too, but this is an uncertain joy, because I suddenly meet with something dark, like a handful of earth in my being, and that scares others, and me, too. That is why I remain so alone, and that is why you must never abandon me, Ulrika, even though I went off so hurriedly to America without preparing you for it with a single word. And when I think of your faithfulness, I only hope you will not get tired, but wait for me and stay as you are and console yourself with something. Perhaps some girl in the village has some child which you can pass the time with while you wait.

Oh, that I had the wings of a bird and could fly to you now. But I have to bow to fate and await the day when it is intended that I shall see you again. I hope that I will be rich then. But do not drive me away, even if I should return like the prodigal son.

It was probably necessary for me to go to America in the beginning, when everything was in such a turmoil, but as things are now, I would do anything to be able to hurry back to you. With you beside me nothing evil can happen to me. You are the rarest flower that ever grew on virgin soil. People like you must never get weary. Do you hear that, never say things like that you are getting tired of waiting. It is dangerous to say that. Help me in your thoughts, Ulrika. My soul is full of concern for both of us.

From the far country where I am now, I send you all

my love and a warm command not to believe in false signs, and above all not to get weary.

Thine for ever, Karl.

P.S. If only I knew a single person who could plead my cause with you, so that you would not reject me, even if you were to hear the truth. But I know nobody.

The same."

LEANDER shaved and changed his shirt but said he could not go to prayers because they were held in his father's house, now that the old man had become bedridden, and he, Leander, was not one to intrude.

Hanna and Linda went off with their respective thoughts of child and stamps, and Elof and Ida came from Old Farm with the blind grandmother behind them and Eva and Maria on each side of her.

And the roads and paths of the village were filled with people assembling for prayers.

All of them had their troubles—fear of bearing children, sorrow at losing them, anxiety for their daily bread, and worries about lawsuits over fences.

Nobody knew that a war had broken out in the world the day before.

Leander went over to Old Farm and said he wanted to see the little one. Ulrika showed reserve although he had the consideration not to call the child Leander.

"There's many things done wrong in this world," he said, sighing.

She lingered over the cradle, and found a crease to smooth out on the tiny sheet.

"If the right ones got each other from the start it would be much better."

"I'm sure the right ones get each other," Ulrika said.

"Well, you can certainly wonder both once and twice about that," Leander went on, hesitatingly. "If I'd known, from the beginning, what I know now, I wouldn't have turned to the right but the left, that March day when I skied down the hill."

"Lullaby, my mother's babe, bake me a cookie, Mother," Ulrika sang, and started to rock the cradle although the child was asleep.

"It's nothing to grin at. If you knew what I know, you wouldn't be so ready to laugh. If you knew what Linda is really like."

"Aren't you ashamed, Leander, going to the neighbors and complaining like that!"

"I don't complain to just anybody. If it was only me she had deceived, I wouldn't say a word."

"But surely, Leander, it would be much better to have that out with Linda herself?"

"You can't have things out with her in any way except giving her a proper rebuke. And as we're two that's been deceived, we ought to help each other to punish her."

Ulrika began giggling again.

"Now you're so solemn, Leander, that—'Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven,' the Bible says."

"You take the whole thing as a joke, but it's more serious than you think."

"Leander, I'll soon get tired of you if you go on being obstinate like this."

"But don't you understand anything at all?"

"What's there to understand in such nonsense?"

"Why, that you're the other!"

"Yes. I see."

She spoke over his head, as if he had been a troublesome child in the arms of another girl. He drew himself up to catch her eye and said:

"Whose child do you think Baby Karl is?"

But he did not reach her. She replied:

"Baby Karl, he's so wonderful. You think he's the sort of thing you can buy, and call your own. But Baby Karl's different. He's something special. Neither his grandmother nor you nor I can call him our own. He'd laugh if he heard it."

"You're changing the subject. You know very well what I mean." And for a moment he succeeded in intruding on her consciousness and making her see him. Then she snapped back:

"Oh, God, if you only knew how tired I am. How tired I am of that question, and tired of what you mean and what everybody asks and means. How tired I am of all hags and cows and bulls. They need only catch sight of me for the truth to start creeping round in them . . . like the itch."

Leander sat with his arms crossed over his knees which he held tight together, and his head drawn in between his shoulders, so that he seemed to enclose a void.

"You talk as if you were the only one who has been unfairly treated. Have you never thought about what I've had to go through for the sake of this business?"

But now she was gone again, listening to something beyond him, to the mother who had held him on her knee long before Ulrika herself had been born.

"One should accept help when it is offered," he said, quoting one of Aunt Tyra's injunctions.

"You don't believe me!" he nagged.

"Isn't that asking a lot?" she replied.

He had stopped looking at her and spoke into the void he was guarding.

"Why is it some people are always being taken in by others? If you'd only believe me, I'd explain how you and me have been deceived in exactly the same way. It's you and me that are in the same boat. And that's why you shouldn't be so stuck-up toward me, always, but back me up more."

"Why aren't you at prayers today?" Ulrika asked.

"You're just like all the others, trying to make a fool of me. But I've got a proof. When you see it, maybe you'll say something different."

He rose and took the ring out of his pocket.

"It's not the only proof I've got, but for the time being just take a look at it and tell me what you think."

She came slowly closer, stretched out her finger and thumb and picked up the ring which lay in the palm of his hand. But her cry of joy excluded him more than her recent irritation.

"Oh yes, that's it! I recognize it! I know what's inscribed on it!"

"Guess where I got it?" he said.

She did not reply, but started walking round the kitchen with the ring between her clasped hands. She talked to herself.

"I knew it! I knew that in the end the next part would come . . . that I'd be given a sign . . . that I'd be given the ring. . . ."

She stopped and put the ring on.

"Now it fits exactly. Just as I thought it would."

Then she looked at Leander, past his thoughts, past his complicated spitefulness, into his real self. And there she found a prayer for deliverance. There, they were in accord.

"Imagine you being the one to bring me tidings of such great joy," she said.

She went across to him, pulled down his head and kissed

him, his cheeks, his mouth and his forehead, with its two kinds of skin.

"Thank you for the ring," she said, "a thousand thanks for coming with the ring. And now you must go, Leander. And don't be sad. For when things are at their worst, one may get a sign; and then one knows that the next part is close." She pushed him out of the kitchen and down the steps.

"Go to prayers, Leander. Go with the others."

He clutched his head, as if to fix the memory of her hands, and went obediently up the hill.

ULRIKA remains behind on her father's farm. In a cloud of joy. A sudden suspicion rends it like a flash of lightning—what if Karl isn't there, in the next part. . . ?

She whirls around, and covers the rent in the cloud of joy.

Brings you tidings of great joy . . . in robes of shining white . . .

Pregnant girl hangs herself . . .

Ugh, how ugly!

There's a mortal poison in the monkshood root, Grandmother said.

No, no knives or ropes or malicious words, then the cloud will be rent.

The next part is hiding in the monkshood root, love is hiding there forever.

She dances in her cloud past the field and the stone wall, past the gnarled birch and the crossroads, past Hanna's sweet-smelling grass and the row of orange lilies, right up to the purple-blue.

The smallest one, by the corner of the house; no, the biggest, nearest the steps.

How deeply it is rooted in the ground. The cloud can hardly bear its being so deeply rooted. The cloud cannot bear the smell of earth; it wants to cry itself into nothingness.

The cloud is so thin, all the way back to Father's farm.

So frighteningly transparent.

Play with me, monkshood, show me what you are hiding
under your cowl.

Two eager birds, harnessed to a carriage, a tiny one.

So many signs; be joyful, my joy.

But all the signs fade and joy is thinned out, leaving her
bare, without faith in the next part.

LEANDER walked into Ant Viktor's, causing a mild sensation among the congregation. His eldest brother, who now read the sermon, repeated the same line three times in his astonishment. Imagine Leander showing himself there at all and with an expression on his face as if he felt welcome not only in his father's house, but in life itself.

Tyra looked at Leander and he acknowledged that she had been right.

The congregation relaxed again and the shoulders of the older people grew rounder and rounder as time crept on; they were seated on planks and had no support for their backs. A small boy who had fallen asleep tumbled to the floor. His mother, Karin, helped him up. He had a lump on his forehead but did not cry. He was allowed to stand up for a while so that the pins and needles in his legs would stop pricking and he stood hiding his face in her black skirt and feeling ashamed. The mother was in mourning for Edit, who had died that spring.

The heat increased, and a stench of bedsores and sour hay rose from the master's bed. The monotonous reading lulled them all like a cradle song.

Suddenly, two loud screams burst in an unhuman voice from Linda's lips.

"Ulrika! Ulrika!"

The sound sent a message to their bodies, a message too heavy for thoughts and words. The congregation was like a flock of cattle which suddenly realizes why the farmer has carried a calf out into the yard.

There was a third shriek of "Ulrika!" Elof hurled himself at the door and after him came all the others, all those who were able to walk.

Linda, the sockets of her eyes as brown as earth, sat powerless, seeing Ulrika's convulsions in the grass.

The falling bell clappers.

The silence.

Ant Viktor's big kitchen, the table with the abandoned books of homilies, the empty benches, the flies.

"Where's Eva—where's Maria? Who screamed so terribly for Ulrika?"

The blind woman sat fumbling for the touch of a human being.

Linda wanted to go out. She got up, but had to hold on to the bedpost to keep herself from falling. She saw the face of the paralyzed man, his fixed, faraway gaze.

"Oh, if you knew what it is like to die," she moaned. "If you knew what it is like to live," she continued, shaking with sobs.

And a shadow passed over his eyes, as if her words had reached him. Ant Viktor's life had lasted eighty years.

She must escape. She got in the way of the blind woman, who took hold of her arm, and began feeling her.

"Who is it . . . stay and tell me . . . lead me!"

Linda pushed her hands away.

"Sit down and wait a little. Just a little. Soon, Eva and Maria will come and lead you home."

She made the old woman sit down, against her will.

"Can't you help me, when I beg you to . . ."

Linda got out of the room and said "no." She repeated it again and again. But the word was extinguished in the air, became a dead sound, like earth being shoveled.

She stood at the highest point of the hill. And the whole sky appeared to her to be a single eye.

Whither shall I flee from Thy presence. . . .

Turn from me that I may rest. . . .

Thou has beset me behind and before. . . .

She was drawn along after the others, she could see the courtyard at Old Farm filling up with people.

But her legs felt limp, and she had to sit in a ditch. She was thirsty. She looked at the earth . . . *earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust* . . . And at the thought she jumped up and began running down the hill.

"Hide me . . . Mamma . . . somebody . . ." she whispered.

AT OLD FARM, Elof staggered about with Ulrika in his arms, repeating again and again:

"She is not dead, but sleepeth."

He continued to walk around, longing every moment to get away, to be alone with his child. But he had to remain among the living, to beg life from them. They were so many; if each of them sacrificed a little warmth, Ulrika would surely be able to avail herself of it.

But she grew cold.

Ida came with a blanket; they wrapped it round the dead girl, and her father laid her on the ground. His tears dripped down on her stiffening face.

Ida sank to her knees and all the others in a wide ring after her. When Linda reached them, Tyra moved aside and gave her a place next to her.

It was so still one could hear the rustling of an aspen.

A feeble moan sounded through the open window of the winter cottage. Ida gave a sob, and the suffocating silence was dissolved in tears and lamentations over Ulrika's death.

Hanna detached herself imperceptibly from the circle of kneeling villagers and went into the cottage to watch over the living child.

(continued from front flap)

It is in her depiction of this relationship early in the book that the author first shows her marvelous insight into the hidden depths of character that never falters in the haunted pages of *THE RAIN BIRD*. The self-immolation of Eggon, the clairvoyance of Linda, the irrevocable wickedness of her love for the boy and her theft of her friend's first sweetheart, her marriage to a man she despises, the confusion and despair of her mother — the story moves to a tragic denouement with the simplicity, the directness, the realism of a ballad. There is no more harrowing passage in the contemporary novel than in which the injured and injured Ulrika lovingly awaits the birth of Linda's child, while her instinct tells her the child should have been hers. The unknown father was surely her

THE RAIN BIRD is an extraordinary novel. Sara Lidman, who is one of Sweden's leading younger writers, combines narrative power with an acute psychological insight, symbolism and precise realistic detail. In its broad landscape and sense of mystery, its concern with good and evil, her book reminds us in some ways of the films of Ingmar Bergman. It is a profoundly moving experience.

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